

Mordecai Kaplan's Understanding of Holiness

WALDEMAR SZCZERBIŃSKI 

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, szcz@amu.edu.pl

Abstract: The Reconstructionist category of holiness, reflecting the essence of God in traditional Judaism, is a challenge both to contemporary Jewish thought and to theological thought in general. This paper attempts to explain why and how Mordecai Kaplan—the forerunner of the most liberal trend in Judaism—embarked on a reconstruction of the biblical concept of holiness and demonstrated the consequences of his transformations. First, Kaplan's concept of holiness is discussed, followed by his description of the notion of "sancta" as advanced by the Reconstructionists. Next, Kaplan's understanding of holiness, which denotes the fullness of humanity rather than the essence of the personal God, as in traditional Judaism, has been presented. Thus, according to Kaplan, holiness is an anthropological and not a theological category because he understood it as a "transcendental validity" on the path to attain human self-fulfillment in this world. From the perspective of tradition, the Reconstructionist concept of holiness results in Judaism's desacralization, which can primarily be seen in the desacralization of God, the Torah, the Chosen People, and the Sabbath. Even allowing for Judaism's diversity of views and positions, Kaplan's concept of holiness is truly revolutionary in modern Jewish thought.

Keywords: Holiness, God, Man, Judaism, Mordecai M. Kaplan, Jewish Reconstructionist

Contemporary Judaism is not a monolith; among all its contemporary currents, Reconstructionism is not only most recent but also most controversial. The other trends (Orthodox, Reform, Conservative) are incarnations of Jewish theism, which remains faithful to the tradition in its most fundamental issues. This latest current in Judaism found its precursor in Mordecai Kaplan.¹ As one might expect, Reconstructionism sets out precisely with the reconstruction of traditional Judaism, whilst relying on ideas inspired by the natural and social sciences. In this approach, it is not faith but knowledge that provides the criterion for an appropriate interpretation of the Bible. Without doubt, Reconstructionism transcended the boundaries of Jewish theism and situated itself in opposition to the latter. According to Kaplan, Judaism is a civilization rather than a religion it has been thus far. Religion is merely one of the numerous constituents of civilization and neither is it the most important,

My deep gratitude extends to Maria Kantor for correcting the English of my article.

¹ Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881–1983) was an American thinker and founder of the most recent Jewish denomination. Guided by pragmatism, functionalism, and naturalism, he carried out a reconstruction of traditional Judaism. His views were substantially influenced by the philosophy of John Dewey. Kaplan's seminal works include *Judaism as a Civilization*; *The Future of the American Jew*; *The Greater Judaism in Making*; *The Meaning of God*; *The Purpose and Meaning*; *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*.

essential or unconditional one. The Reconstructionists contend that one's approach to the Bible not only may, but even must, undergo changes just as the other component elements of the Jewish civilization. From now on, one would not have to be a theist in order to remain an adherent of Judaism, which is an utter novelty in the Jewish world. The Reconstructionists eschew the supernatural and consequently, do not recognize the divine origin of the Torah, the theory of creation, miracles, and eternal life in the beyond.² Their concept of holiness—which embodied the essence of God in traditional Judaism—presents a challenge to the contemporary Jewish thought and theological thought in general. Hence this paper attempts to explain the rationale and methodology of Kaplan's reconstruction of the traditional conception of "holiness" as well as to outline the implications of a notion thus revisited.³

In theology, "holiness" is the concept that most often and most felicitously describes God and what is intentionally associated with him. In the Hebrew Bible, "holiness" is denoted by two terms: *kadosh*, used exclusively with respect to God, and *kodesh*, which may refer to persons, objects, places, and times which are attributed a sacred dimension. This word reflects God's dissimilarity to the world and his nature as well as the character of everything which is to be isolated, separated and excluded from worldly creations and which is ascribed the supreme value. It is beyond doubt that in traditional Judaism, whether biblical or rabbinical, "holiness" was first and foremost inherent to God and expressed his principal attribute.⁴ God alone was holy, whereas anything else could only be sanctified by God or hallowed in his name. By default, this quality was reserved exclusively for God. The holiness of people, objects, places and events was secondary and transitional, by virtue of attributing or transposing the transcendental (creative) reality to an immanent (created) reality, though not in the ontic but in the cultic and moral dimension.

1. Mordecai Kaplan's Concept of Holiness

Kaplan did not abandon the notion of sanctity but lent a new meaning to it, admitting that "it is folly to try to eliminate the concept of holiness from our vocabulary. It is the only accurate term for our deepest and most treasured experiences.

² On Kaplan's life, work and views, see Cohen – Scult – Jospe, "Kaplan Mordecai," 751–753; Scult, "Mordecai M. Kaplan", 3–13; Hertzberg, "Introduction to the 1981 Edition," XIX–XXXV; Eisenstein, "Mordecai M. Kaplan", 253–279; Szcerbiński, *Postulat nie-osobowego Boga*.

³ The issue of holiness and manifestations of desacralization in Jewish Reconstructionism are discussed extensively in: Szcerbiński, *Rekonstrukcjonistyczna desakralizacja judaizmu*.

⁴ More broadly on that issue see: Jankowski, "Biblijne pojęcie świętości człowieka," 109–115; Jelonek, *Biblijne pojęcie sacrum*; Kepnes, "Holiness"; Kohler, "Holiness"; Krawczyk, "Biblijna koncepcja świętości," 345–362; Zając, "Judaizm jako religia," 46–60.

The moment any situation evokes from us the awareness that we have to do with something to which no other term than «sacred» is adequate, we are on the point of discovering God. In fact, we already sense His reality.”⁵ Nonetheless, he rejected the traditional understanding of holiness in Judaism and put forward an altogether new concept of sanctity. The underlying premise of this programmatic and revolutionary change was that each civilization recognizes the most important elements of its collective life as significant and designates them using the category of sanctity. By those means, people belonging to a given civilization may attain salvation understood as self-actualization.⁶ In Reconstructionism, “the distinction between the holy and the profane, the sacred and the secular, is essentially the same as the distinction between the valuable and the worth-less, the important and the trivial, the significant and the meaningless. Holiness is that quality by virtue of which an object is felt to be of transcendent importance to us. Every civilization recognizes the existence of such sancta, or transcendently important objects.”⁷

As Kaplan argued, it was virtually a scientific error to maintain that there exists an exceptional and singularly Jewish concept of God. The uniqueness and originality do not manifest themselves in the idea of God, but in the peculiar manner that the Jews exploit the idea of God. Specifically, it consisted on linking the faith in God, contingent on the general degree of cultural and social development, with the elements of Jewish tradition which were granted the highest rank of the sacred.⁸ At this point, one is inclined to ask which civilizational components should be recognized as the most important, and thus holiness can be attributed to them. Considering the entirety of Kaplan's thought, the answer seems evident. In Reconstructionism, anything that serves to achieve the fullness of life, along with such values as truth, good, and beauty, is holy. “Religion has the one word which seeks to express that meaning in all its depth and mystery. That word is ‘holiness.’”⁹ This is because holiness is the sum of specific elements, the fullness of meaning, and the ultimate fulfillment. Not only does one need to identify these particular elements, but also realize that happiness is a larger whole, of which truth, good, and beauty are only fragments.¹⁰

The term that Kaplan employed—followed by all Jewish Reconstructionists—was “sancta,” which was redefined. In general, the word *sancta* (sing. *sanctum*) is usually presumed to mean shrines or holy sites, and occasionally places where one works and rests.¹¹ In order to dissociate themselves completely from the traditional notion of holiness and underscore their own innovative approach, the Reconstructionists

⁵ Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 31.

⁶ Cf. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, IX.

⁷ Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 82.

⁸ Cf. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, IX.

⁹ Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 31.

¹⁰ Cf. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 31.

¹¹ See “Sancta,” NSFK 1294.

seldom use the Hebrew word *kadosh* in their writings and avoid its English equivalents: *holiness* – *holy*, *sacredness* – *sacred* or *sanctity* – *saint*. However, they usually use *these terms* when discussing traditional Judaism. Still, this is not a simple change of the term employed in traditional Judaism, but a substantial transformation of the very notion of holiness.

In Reconstructionism, sanctity expressed by “sancta” refers to life as a whole as opposed to its selected dimensions or aspects. “We invest places, persons and events with sacredness only as they contribute to our awareness of the sanctity of life as a whole, only as they symbolize the holiness that is in all things.”¹² In its broadest sense, sanctity means fullness of life or happiness. The “sancta” will thus be related to anything that contributes to attaining that fullness. For Kaplan, attributing real sanctity to persons, objects and events was inappropriate and anachronistic, which is why he warns one against an approach he calls philistine, whereby only certain places or occasions are sacred, while all other manifestations qualify as secular. As long as it persists, the attitude prevents one from departing from the primitive and magical concept of sanctity.¹³ Consequently, the traditional understanding of holiness amounts to an expression of ignorance in the eyes of the Reconstructionists. “In our logical thinking we reject such notions as superstition, having been taught by our Prophets to associate the holiness of God with the thought that ‘the whole earth is filled with His glory’. But our emotional reactions often revert to the attitude of primitive religion, and we then associate holiness only with persons, places and events which have been sanctified by traditional rituals.”¹⁴ What did Kaplan mean using the word “sancta”?

In Reconstructionism, “sancta” is a multi-vocal term denoting the most important and major elements of civilization, forms of identity as well as the guarantees of continuance and lastingness, an instrument of salvation, the collective soul or collective consciousness, the expression of the universal presence of God in the world or a manifestation of God in human life. Above all, “sancta” are the foremost elements of the Jewish civilization.¹⁵

Simon Noveck elucidates: “Every civilization identifies the most important elements of its life—objects, persons, places, events, days, customs—and invests them with sanctity. In the case of Judaism, these sanctified elements include the patriarchs, Moses, the prophets, the psalmists, the Torah, the Temple, the Sabbath, and the holidays.”¹⁶ Combined with other elements of civilization, sancta constitute folk religion. Kaplan himself asserted: “The religious element in a people’s civilization is objectified in those institutions, places, historic events, popular heroes and all other

¹² Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 32.

¹³ Cf. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 32.

¹⁴ Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 32.

¹⁵ More on Judaism as a civilization see: Szczerbiński, *Postulat nie-osobowego Boga*, 96–107.

¹⁶ Noveck, “Kaplan and Milton Steinberg,” 143.

objects of popular reverence to which superlative importance or sanctity is ascribed. *These sancta, the attitude toward life that they imply and the specific observances that they inspire, together constitute the religion of a people.*¹⁷ The observation that each civilization has its own sancta is crucial. The principal task of all who belong to a given civilization is to show concern and solicitude to keep their sancta alive. Since Judaism is a religious civilization, then it

affirm[s] the truth that the Jewish people, under the leadership of its Lawgivers, Prophets and Sages, considered the chief function of its collective life to be the fostering of its sancta. It sought consciously to make its collective experience yield meaning for the enrichment of the individual Jew. That is how the entire life of the Jew came, in time, to be invested with *mitzvot* (divine commands), designed to impress on him the moral and spiritual values which had emerged from the process of Jewish living. The *berakot* (benedictions), which precede the performance of these *mitzvot*, imply that those *mitzvot* are intended to sanctify, that is to confer worth on, Jewish life.¹⁸

In Reconstructionism, sancta represent forms of preserving identity. Allan Lazaroff noted that Kaplan drew on sociology to develop a conviction “that peoples preserve their identity through their sancta, that is, through their sacred objects, literature, events, and persons.”¹⁹ It follows from Kaplan’s arguments that without their sancta Jews are incapable of embracing, sustaining, and transmitting Jewish identity. To put it in a nutshell, Jewish identity hinges upon the Jewish sancta.

Take away the traditional sancta from the Jewish people, and there is nothing left to account for its past. There remains a very small spiritual capital, indeed, on which to build a Jewish future. Changes will undoubtedly take place in the beliefs and practices that have hitherto constituted the Jewish religion, but they will be within the scope of the historical sancta. The Jewish religion will never suffer the fate of the Christian religion. It will never have to be replaced by a religion more native and integral to the social heritage of which it is a part.²⁰

Kaplan had no doubt that regardless of the upshot of changes occurring in the spiritual life of other nations Jews would naturally retain the current degree of self-awareness and would constantly seek new means of expression for their historical sancta.²¹

¹⁷ Kaplan, *The Future*, 46.

¹⁸ Kaplan, *The Future*, 46.

¹⁹ Lazaroff, “Kaplan and John Dewey,” 180.

²⁰ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 324–325.

²¹ According to Kaplan, the relation between the Jewish religion and the Jewish nation is in no way analogous to the relation between Christianity and the so-called Christian peoples. This is because the Christian religion is not native to any Christian nation and therefore, it was never able to become an organic

Of this we may be sure, because the Jews have a religion which was not imposed upon them from without; because the *nisus* to Jewish collective life in the diaspora, deriving mainly from the momentum of the past, functions chiefly through the specific objects, places, personalities and events around which the Jews have built up the mental associations of sanctity. Bearing in mind that historical religion is the sanctification of specific elements in the group life, and, inversely, that group life naturally gives rise to the sanctification of some of the specific elements in it, we cannot but conclude that historical religion without group life is empty of content, and is merely a way of speaking. *Group life which refuses to be merely a replica of a community of ants is bound to find expression in collective religion.*²²

In his opinion, Jewish identity was still an ongoing and relevant phenomenon, owing its relevance to none other but the Jewish sancta:

The answer, which I derived from the relation of religion to group life, enabled me to discover what we really mean by a religion's maintaining its continuity, despite radical changes in its beliefs and practices. I became aware that, in every civilization or culture of a people, certain elements in it, principally persons, places, objects and texts are singled out as holy because of the power they are supposed to exert, from the standpoint of welfare and salvation. These are sancta of a civilization. They are transmitted from generation to generation. As a result of changes which a people undergoes in the course of time, the power or holiness of these sancta is accounted for differently, in keeping with the changes in general outlook and conception of God. These sancta, however, in remaining the same from generation to generation, convey a feeling of group sameness and continuity to the generations that cherish or revere them. Consequently, so long as we Jews hold sacred the same persons, places, objects, relationships, texts, special days etc., as did our ancestors, though for reasons different from theirs, we live by the same religion as they did. Moses, Eretz Yisrael, a Torah scroll, the covenant between God and Israel, Sacred Scripture, Yom Kippur are such sancta in Jewish religion. That principle, while solving the problem of continuity in Jewish religion amid the changes which it is bound to undergo, also helps to emphasize the fact that belonging to the Jewish people is a basic prerequisite to professing Jewish religion.²³

The problem of the identity of being has been the object of intellectual inquiry since antiquity. The pre-Socratics wondered whether everything changed in a being or whether the change was only apparent. The Aristotelian theory of hylomorphism²⁴

component of any European culture. On the other hand, Judaism is an indigenous element of the Jewish people, and therefore, an essential and inalienable valuable element of the Jewish culture.

²² Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 325.

²³ Kaplan, "The Way I Have Come," 306–307.

²⁴ Hylomorphism (also hylemorphism) is an Aristotelian notion according to which each substance is a being composed of two inseparably linked elements: the changeable matter and the immutable form. This theory made it possible to account for the identity of being despite its mutability.

resolved the dispute, demonstrating that each being comprises elements which are mutable and immutable, material and formal, essential and inessential. Consequently, being is the same, even though it is not the same. With respect to Judaism and any other religion for that matter, this means that religious identity is preserved when what is vital endures perpetually despite the changes that do occur in what is inessential. According to Kaplan, the sancta are the vehicle of what is vital for Judaism and ensure the preservation of identity for the benefit of the individual and the collective. The persistence of Judaism or its abeyance are, therefore, dependent on its sancta. At the same time, "[t]he discovery of the role which the sancta of a civilization play in maintaining the continuity of a religion has helped me formulate the position we Jews should take toward the ritual observances in our own religion. Ritual observances consist in specific actions to be performed, or formulas to be recited, in association with the sancta."²⁵ In traditional Judaism, all observances and ritual formulas are strictly defined by the Jewish law (*halakha*) which, construed as divine, is not subject to change. As maintained by Kaplan, this traditional preclusion of any change as far as the law is concerned is harmful to Judaism because it leads to neglecting the Jewish sancta.²⁶ "We should feel free to revise traditional rites and observances, and to create new ones [...] The highlighting of the same sancta would counteract the consequences of what might be too much latitude in manner of observance."²⁷

Although the sancta are hallowed by the historical experience of the religious group and as such used to ensure the continuation of a given religion, the Reconstructionist held that a number of those sancta not only can but even should undergo modification:

As a result of historic changes some of these sancta may, in time, become obsolete, and new sancta may come into being, but those that have played a dominant role throughout the ages in shaping the ideals of the group will continue to be revered and to be invested with new meanings as a result of new experience. The Sabbath and Holy Days, the *Torah*, *Prophets* and *Holy Writings*, the Synagogue, the Hebrew language and Eretz Yisrael can retain their sanctity for the Jew, even without recourse to dogma or restriction of free thought, because of their demonstrable value to Jewish life.²⁸

As Kaplan himself admitted, the concept of sancta enabled him to transition from the traditionally understood revealed religion to a naturalist paradigm, because the sancta became the object of naturalistic reinterpretation in Reconstructionism.

²⁵ Kaplan, "The Way I Have Come," 307.

²⁶ Cf. Kaplan, "The Way I Have Come," 307–308.

²⁷ Kaplan, "The Way I Have Come," 308.

²⁸ Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 162–163.

The concept of sancta, more particularly, permits the change from revelational to naturalist religion by the reinterpretation of the sancta in naturalistic terms. One does not, for example, have to believe that God actually rested on the seventh day after six days of creation in order to experience the religious value of the Sabbath. As one of the sancta of Jewish life, the meaning of the Sabbath can be reinterpreted in terms that enable it to retain its sacredness for us, even though we no longer accept the Biblical version of its origin. The very idea of reinterpretation, which has gained wide currency, is a contribution of Reconstructionism.²⁹

The reinterpretation of Judaism viewed as a civilization presupposes the reinterpretation of the Jewish sancta. The main goal of all Reconstructionist efforts is to preserve Judaism, even at the expense of the inviolability of the sancta. As they argue, the traditional understanding of sanctity does not serve to sustain the vitality of Judaism.

A living civilization is, of necessity, a changing civilization, but in changing itself it does not lose its identity any more than does an individual in passing from childhood to maturity. The same principle applies to the religious aspect of a civilization. To make revitalization possible, the sancta of religion must be reinterpreted in each generation so that their meanings are relevant to the needs of the generation. *Tradition must not be a source of authority, imposing restrictions on the creativity of later generations, but a source of wisdom and morale awakening new creative powers.* When sancta have become meaningless, they cease, in the nature of the case, to be sancta. But this need not trouble us as long as a people lives and creates, for then it produces new sancta. To keep religion vital, religious thought must be free.³⁰

The reinterpretation of the traditional notion of holiness also resulted from a novel concept of salvation, which was reduced to achieving happiness in the imminent world, here and now. According to the Reconstructionists, a certain stage in the development of Judaism became a Jewish memory.

Later a change came over religion, due to the altered conception of salvation, which thereafter was regarded as attainable only in the life after death. What happened to the sancta of the first stage or to those items of holiness which had to be reckoned with as a means of obtaining rain, conquering enemies, enjoying prosperity? Were other sancta discovered as in need of being reckoned with, and therefore as constituting the conditions of other-worldly salvation? Not at all. What actually happened was that the original sancta, or the conditions of salvation as conceived in the first stage of religion, were given meanings which fitted them into the other-worldly pattern of thought. They were thus able to

²⁹ Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 487–488.

³⁰ Kaplan, *The Future*, 48.

continue as means of salvation, though it was a different kind of salvation of which they then came to be the means.³¹

Once reinterpreted, the traditionally understood holiness would become relevant, imbued with vital energy and desirable.

As Jews, we feel impelled to maintain the continuity and growth of the Jewish people. There can be no ultimate good or salvation for us, either as individuals or as a group, unless we are permitted to express ourselves creatively as Jews. The conditions essential to our salvation must therefore *include* those which enable us to experience continuity with the Jewish past, as well as make possible a Jewish future. That continuity cannot be maintained without actually reliving the ancient experience of the will to live abundantly. There is no other possible way of reliving that experience than by giving the ancient Jewish sancta a new lease on life, which can be done by reinterpretation. Those elements in the traditional sancta which can still be proved to have an intrinsic connection with ultimate good or salvation, as we now conceive it, should be singled out and treated as social and mental requirements without salvation is for us impossible.³²

It needs to be noted that when approached from a pragmatic standpoint, the sancta include only those elements of the Jewish civilization which reflect existential needs of the human and serve as symbols of individual or collective yearnings.³³

Throughout the history of Judaism, there were certain events, persons, places and objects which, for pragmatic reasons, were incorporated in the trove of the sancta. Consequently, the individual perceived the history of their group as their own. Kaplan asserted that the sancta were subject to repeated interpretations which in their turn became the ideology of the group and gave meaning to human existence. A uniform and unvarying interpretation (ideology) of the Jewish sancta served as an interpretive yardstick for the individual life and the requisite of salvation.³⁴ For the Reconstructionists, the arrangement is no longer tenable because contemporary Judaism lacks one shared ideology and therefore, one uniform understanding of the sacred is absent. They suggest their own interpretation, which enables the historical sancta to retain their status as the sources of ethical incentive and spiritual fortitude for the adherents of Judaism, even though they may espouse distinct philosophies of life. They claim:

the sense of unity and even of like-mindedness is not contingent upon the sameness of interpretation, but upon the sameness of the constellation of realities interpreted. The latter sameness is far more unifying than agreement in abstract generalizations. If Jews will

³¹ Kaplan, *The Future*, 179.

³² Kaplan, *The Future*, 179–180.

³³ Cf. Kaplan, *The Future*, 180.

³⁴ Cf. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 519.

thrill to the sancta, or constellation of historical realities which figure in their tradition, and maintain those realities as centers of ethical and spiritual reference, no matter how far apart they are in their views about life – they will be sufficiently united to function in their collective capacity as an instrument of salvation to the individual.³⁵

2. Sancta as a Constitutive Element in Any Civilization

Kaplan's assertion that each civilization has its own religion as well as its own sancta is particularly important. In his view, Judaism does not surpass other religions nor are its sancta superior. Even so, it is the sancta which lend singularity to the Jewish religion.

The difference between Jewish religion and all others does not consist so much in the uniqueness of its conception of God, as in the uniqueness of its sancta. Loyalty to Judaism need, therefore, involve no pretensions to religious superiority. Jewish religion differs from the other religions not in being *unlike* them, for they too, have sancta that are products of Jewish historic experience and not of the historic experience of other branches of human society. *We are faithful to Jewish religion, not because we have chosen it as the best of all religions, but because it is ours, the only religion we have, an inseparable part of our collective personality as a people. If some of us find that religion unacceptable in the form in which it has come down from the past, there is nothing but inertia to stop us from making it acceptable.*³⁶

One of the well-entrenched Reconstructionist convictions is that not only Judaism but all religions help their believers to experience the reality of God through sancta.³⁷ Followers of particular religions “may have very similar conceptions of God and still be adherents of different religions, because of the different sancta through which they experience God. Each group of sancta represents a distinct culture or civilization. Hence what permanently differentiates the Jewish religion from other religions is the fact that it represents the Jewish culture or civilization and articulates the self-consciousness of the Jewish People.”³⁸

As can be seen, each religion is possessed of its own sancta, which may happen to be identical, similar or utterly different. Nonetheless, all sancta perform the same

³⁵ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 519–520.

³⁶ Kaplan, *The Future*, 47.

³⁷ For the Christians, such sancta include, e.g. the person of Jesus, the cross and the books of the New Testament. On the other hand, the Prophet Mohammed, the crescent moon, the Blackstone of Aqaba and the Ramadan are some of the foremost sancta of Islam.

³⁸ Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 175.

function and have the same value within their proper religion. The sancta of each religious community quite naturally mean considerably more for its members than for any other group. Whether the sancta of a given group are more ethical or more valuable than their counterparts in any other group is irrelevant in the Reconstructionist paradigm. Since all religions strive for the salvation of the community by means of peculiar sancta, the assumption that a religion is the only religion or the sole true faith is untenable in Reconstructionism. "No religion can be absolutely more or less true than another."³⁹ Each religion exists within the framework of its civilization and has no need to justify itself nor prove its own superiority or the superiority of its sancta.⁴⁰ Specific sancta are the underpinning of the identity of a particular religion and enable it to last over numerous generations, even though the community witnesses changes in their lifestyle and mindset. The Reconstructionists take equality of all religions for granted, which is why they reject the proposition that any religion eclipses the others, making no exception even for Judaism. As they argue, Jewish religion can no longer claim superiority on the grounds of exclusive prerogative to divine revelation. It is exceptional insofar as its own cultural patterns are exceptional. Judaism is "different" from other religions but it is not "better" or "superior."⁴¹ Hence the sancta of Judaism are merely distinct from the sancta of other religions but do not outweigh them in terms of quality or importance.

Kaplan drew attention to the universality of the traditional Jewish sancta, which were present in other religions. At the same time, he alleged that Christianity had appropriated Jewish sancta and asserted their exclusivity; certain sancta had originally been the foundation of the Judaic identity only.

That does not militate against their becoming a source of universal values. Thus the Patriarchs, Moses, the Prophets, the Psalmists are all sancta of Judaism. But we Jews have no desire to monopolize them. On the contrary, we are happy when the rest of the world finds in them a source of guidance and inspiration. But the Church is entirely unwarranted in claiming for itself these and other sancta of Judaism, and regarding them as misunderstood or desecrated by the Jews who reject the interpretation which Christianity gives to them.⁴²

In Reconstructionism, sharing sancta is considered possible, even recommended. It is, however, inadmissible that any religion should seek to impose or coerce the adoption of its sancta.⁴³ "Even by bringing only psychological pressure to bear on minorities to adopt the sancta of the majority group and to discard their own,

³⁹ Goldsmith, "Kaplan and Henry Nelson Wieman," 215.

⁴⁰ Cf. Goldsmith, "Kaplan and Henry Nelson Wieman," 215; Kaplan, *Judaism in Transition*, 282.

⁴¹ Cf. Weisberg, "Theory of Religion," 188.

⁴² Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 428.

⁴³ Cf. Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 479.

the adherents of a missionary religion sin against that very voluntarism which is the one aspect of Reconstructionism.”⁴⁴

As constantly reiterated by Kaplan, religions do not differ from one another in their degree of truth but in their collective sancta, which result from the particular experiences of a given community and which are approached as revealed by God or revealing God. From that standpoint, no religion can legitimately claim superiority over others. Moreover, continuing adherence to one's religion does not necessarily translate into the permanence of its sancta. When the followers of some religion notice that the traditional teachings have become obsolete or inapplicable, they do not need to abandon their religion, but continue to celebrate their sancta; the only action required is to reinterpret and reassess the sancta of their religion in line with the scientific achievements or truths they acknowledge to be objective or universal.⁴⁵

For the Reconstructionists, Judaism is more than a religion: a religious civilization which has its own sancta. Living in two civilization, the Jews of the diaspora build their identity based on the sancta of both civilizations. As Kaplan explained:

The history of the Jewish religion points to the truth that *the religion which invests with universal import the sancta of the civilization in which it functions has most survival value*. A religion does so when it enables these sancta to elicit loyalty not merely to one's people, but also loyalty to what is regarded as the deepest and holiest of human interests [...]. If the institutions of the conquering civilization can satisfy as many human interests as those which the conquered civilization had satisfied, the individual will transfer not only his political but also spiritual allegiance to the conquering civilization. In such a case, the conquered civilization is doomed. *The secret of the survival of Judaism in the face of the successive of Canaanite, Babylonian, Greek, Roman and Arabic civilizations is the fact that in all these epochs the Jewish religion invested the sancta of the Jewish people with such universal, ethical and spiritual significance that the issue involved was felt to be not only the saving of the Jewish people, but saving of all that made human life worth living.*⁴⁶

The American Jews cherish the sancta of Judaism as well as the sancta which became hallowed in the course of American history. The sancta of the American civilization include, e.g. the Constitution of the United States, the Declaration of Independence, the Liberty Bell, the Arlington National Cemetery, the stars and stripes of the national flag.

But the value or sacredness of such holy objects is not inherent in them. The flag is but a piece of colored cloth, the *Sefer Torah* a piece of parchment with ink-marks on it. It is life

⁴⁴ Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 430.

⁴⁵ Cf. Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 431.

⁴⁶ Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 333–334.

or relationship to those purposes that spell life's meaning for us, that gives value to these objects. Their holiness is derivative and depends on our faith in the supreme value of life itself, in the holiness of life. If life itself is worthless, no object on earth can have any value. When religion ascribes holiness to God, it is saying in effect that life as a whole, the life of the universe of which our lives are but a part, is the supreme value from which all others are derived. The criterion for the sacredness of any object is its contribution to the enhancement of life, to our sense of its worth and importance.⁴⁷

Kaplan effected a religious interpretation of the major values of American life, to which he assigned the category of the sacred. For the Reconstructionists, those particular sancta include the events, persons, institutions and other objects celebrated by the Americans, because they are considered ideas and ideals of superior importance to Americans who aspire to accomplish the highest goals of human life. It seems that Kaplan found American democracy to be a singular kind of American religion, stating as follows: "And since all that a People regards as holy represents its religion, and since God is manifest as the Power that gives human life its sanctity or supreme worth, *the Faith America is the sum of all those spiritual attitudes which cluster about the American sancta and give them their significance.*"⁴⁸

Kaplan was convinced that the Jewish sancta could contribute to consolidating democracy in America to ultimately foster the emergence of a single, universal American religion with its universal sancta. He asserted explicitly:

I have deemed it necessary to look to the American people and its civilization for moral and spiritual values with no less eagerness than to the Jewish people. The role which sancta play in a civilization in giving to that civilization a religion, a consciousness of its destiny, and an awareness of its having to be a means of salvation to those who live by it, afford us American Jews an opportunity to make an important contribution to American life. We should single out the heroes, the events, the texts, the relationships, the significant days, that help to fashion in the American people not only a common consciousness but also a common conscience, and interpret those American sancta from the standpoint of democracy as a way of life and as a means to salvation [...]. By stressing democracy in that spirit, we would contribute to the emergence of a religion for all Americans. American civilization would thus acquire a spiritual significance analogous for us Jews to that of Jewish civilization, and for Christian to that of Christian civilization. That it would do without in the least impugning either the Jewish or Christian social heritage.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 83.

⁴⁸ Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 482.

⁴⁹ Kaplan, "The Way I have Come," 317.

Kaplan was aware that the attempt to forge one single American religion comprising a set of universal sancta that the community would arrive at, was highly likely to face misunderstanding and opposition, because such an aspiration goes against the notion that only one specific religion holds the key to salvation, solely and exclusively. The Reconstructionist suggestion that one can follow two religions simultaneously—the Jewish or Christian religion on the one hand, and the American religion, on the other—verges on the absurd.⁵⁰ Yet, Kaplan was convinced that “on calmer consideration, however, the proposal calling for the accentuation of American sancta, and for placing them in a context of democracy raised to a religion and related to the belief in God will be seen as a much needed development in American life, and as an inescapable one, if democracy is to become a faith to live by as well as one die for.”⁵¹

In Reconstructionism, sancta are construed as an expression of the universal presence of God in the world and a manifestation of the divine in human existence. According to Kaplan, the idea of God functions as an organic acceptance of certain elements human life and in their environment, or acceptance of reality as a whole in relation to the group, which ultimately promotes self-actualization or salvation. That organic approval is expressed in the adjective “holy” which describes each object that one approaches with the highest reverence.⁵²

3. Holiness: The Expression of the Fullness of Humanity

In Kaplan’s opinion, before the human was capable of formulating the idea of “God,” they became aware that there were elements in their surroundings, specific objects, places, and persons whose presence was necessary to satisfy certain human needs. Those elements were attributed a power which, as one believed, could be used to one’s benefit by repeating certain facts and formulas whose nature was virtually magical. As their self-awareness grew, humans became increasingly conscious of the significance of the clan or the tribe to which they belong. This, in turn, reinforced the notion that the magical practices in which one engaged are insufficient while the dependence of the individual on the group became overriding.

As a consequence the indispensable elements in the life and environment of the group acquired that additional significance for him which he tried to convey by viewing them and conducting himself toward them as holy. With that the notion of godhood began to emerge, *for psychologically, the notion of godhood is the precipitate of the notion of holiness.*

⁵⁰ Cf. Kaplan, “The Way I have Come,” 318.

⁵¹ Kaplan, “The Way I Have Come,” 318.

⁵² Cf. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 317.

A holy being is synonymous with a divine being. As man developed further, he extended the domain of holiness to include not only visible or picturable objects, events and persons, but also customs, laws, social relationships, truths and ideals.⁵³

In Reconstructionism, “worth” and “significance” refer to the same kind of psychological response as holiness does.

In Kaplan's repeatedly emphasized statement, each religion has its objects, persons, places and events which are considered sacred or constitute the supreme value in the collective consciousness of its believers.

This truth is sufficiently recognizable when we deal with ancient religions, each of which had its own sacred trees, waters, stones and mountains, but escapes us when we deal with the great historical religions [...]. The beginnings of the Jewish religion are marked by rivalry between Canaanitish sancta and the sancta which Israelites brought with them from the wilderness, between the bull image and the ark of YHWH, between the local sanctuaries and the sanctuary at Jerusalem. In the very process of upholding the claims of the Israelitish sancta there emerged the great spiritual conceptions and moral ideals which have rendered them of universal import.⁵⁴

Kaplan noted the very fact of the Samaritans demanding a shrine on the Mount Gerizim sufficed to bring forth believers of a religion different than Jewish. Similarly, Christianity split away from the Jewish religion by adding the person of Jesus to other Jewish sancta, although the early Christians did continue to perform Jewish rites, accepted all beliefs and respected all sancta of Biblical Judaism.⁵⁵

“The God-idea may remain with him purely as a state of mind, and does not have to be externalized [...]. Concretely speaking, this means that a group religion is least of all a *philosophy* of life. Its function primarily is to invest with sanctity not life in general, but specific objects, persons, places, events, days, etc., and specific codes of law, customs and morals.”⁵⁶ The idea of God epitomizes everything which has been found to be holy. For the Reconstructionists, it is undeniable that something in the human nature compels them to seek personal and social salvation.

By identifying that aspect of reality with God, we are carrying out in modern times the implications of the conception that man is created in God's image. For such an identification

⁵³ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 318.

⁵⁴ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 319.

⁵⁵ As claimed by Kaplan, the Church made a correct pronouncement stating that the first day rather than the seventh is holy. If the Church observed the same day, then Christianity would not have been sufficiently different from the Jewish religion. See: Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 318.

⁵⁶ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 319–320.

implies 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*. The corollary of the thought of man's likeness to God has always been the sense of the sacredness of human personality, of its inherent worth.⁵⁷

Conversely, anything that does not lead to holiness, which diminishes likeness to God, impoverishes human faculties, which constitutes the proclamation of life and deprives it of fullness and meaning amounts to sin.⁵⁸

Essentially, Kaplan does not speak of the human soul but of the “spirit of man” or “spirit of holiness,” thanks to which any correlation with God is viable at all. That human spirit is nothing else than an “instrument of holiness”⁵⁹ and, as Kaplan believed, has been personified as Logos. However, the personification was unwarranted, because God, the human and Logos were erroneously linked by constitutive partnership, in which each has a special function to perform. Thus, holiness became the function of Logos, the Holy Spirit in other words. Meanwhile, monotheistic holiness defines the relationship between God and the human.⁶⁰ For Kaplan the Bible usually associates the “spirit of holiness” with the human rather than God. The notion is employed with reference to God on mere three occasion, twice in Isaiah and once in the Psalms. As deduced by Kaplan, in Isaiah, “spirit” is synonymous with God: “But they rebelled, and grieved his holy spirit” (Isa 63:10), whereas “spirit of holiness” is only applicable to a collective being, a group which forms a community. “Of no prophet nor of the Messiah is it ever said that God put His spirit *into Him*.”⁶¹ Given that holiness or the spirit of holiness manifests in ethical conduct, it cannot be attributed to an individual person. Holiness can only be in evidence in the interaction between people, and therefore the most valuable modes and forms of collective existence are approached by Kaplan as “manifestation of God and human life.”⁶²

As regards the Psalms, its verses clearly indicate a connection between the “spirit of holiness” and the ethical dimension, while “[a]gainst you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps 51:4) intimates the awareness that all sins against one fellow human are sins against God. The psalm reveals the true meaning of “spirit,” which denotes the power of human renewal—the renewal of oneself—by virtue of which sin is overcome. “The spirit of holiness belongs to God and man in common. It protects man against the power of sin. Sin can never altogether destroy

⁵⁷ Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 89.

⁵⁸ Cf. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 90.

⁵⁹ Cf. Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 116.

⁶⁰ Cf. Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 116.

⁶¹ Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 117.

⁶² Kaplan, *The Future*, 174.

the spirit of holiness in man.”⁶³ As long as a person interacts with others, they are constrained by a sense of moral responsibility.

In Reconstructionism, holiness refers to the divine element which has been inculcated in human by God. Thanks to the spirit of holiness, that universal call to sanctity (Lev 11:44) is extended to each and every person. “In sanctifying God, man becomes holy.”⁶⁴ In a sense, the spirit is tantamount to creating God, while the moral responsibility is a manifestation of divine creativity. “God and man remain distinct in the correlation: man sanctifies God and God sanctifies man. Common to both is the process of sanctification.”⁶⁵

One of the Reconstructionist premises is that the bond between God and human in Judaism operates by virtue of their logical co-dependence, a mutual correlation as opposed to a mystical union. It is asserted that the Torah speaks of holiness reified through “statutes and judgments,” whereas in the “spirit of holiness” in the Prophets and the Psalms describes the ethical spirit or, to use Kantian categories, the practical reason. “Due to the spirit of holiness, man emerges as an individual. Not spirit (as used in term *the Holy Ghost*), but the spirit of holiness makes man; only ethical reason, not reason as such (in the Aristotelian sense of the term), has this catalytic power. Monotheism differentiates the human from the non-human as the special concern of ethical reason.”⁶⁶ It was evident for Kaplan that only monotheistic approach to ethical issues was effective enough to close the door to any mysticism. It is only proper conduct which determines whether one is worthy of the spirit of holiness; no other criterion exists. Absence of rational knowledge cannot incite the inner spirit of holiness, which is expressed in the human bond with God.⁶⁷

In Reconstructionism, the concept of the “spirit of holiness” is free of any associations with mysticism. The latter is purely an individual experience, whereas holiness which Kaplan identified with ethical conduct, spans interpersonal relations.⁶⁸ The most important conclusion drawn from the Reconstructionist understanding of the notion “spirit of holiness” is that metaphysical knowledge of God is irrelevant, but knowing him in the ethical manner is crucial. This derives from the functional approach, in which action rather than knowledge is the measure of authenticity. “All nations of holiness, whether theoretical, mystical or cultic, other than the one which identifies it with human conduct, have a nimbus of idolatry. In monotheism, holiness is essentially a human attribute.”⁶⁹ Kaplan is convinced that when man sanctifies himself through righteousness or simply proper contact, he notices the holiness of

⁶³ Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 117.

⁶⁴ Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 117.

⁶⁵ Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 118.

⁶⁶ Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 119.

⁶⁷ Cf. Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 119–120.

⁶⁸ Cf. Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 120.

⁶⁹ Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 117.

God. It is also in this light that he interpreted the biblical verse: “the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness” (Isa 5:16). In his view, the Torah negates all forms of mistagogy and ascetic practices as ways to attain holiness.⁷⁰

The Reconstructionist holiness is relational as opposed to personal, which is why the “spirit of holiness” is not a separate entity in the manner of the third person in the Trinity, but “the spirit” that manifests itself in the world by virtue of one’s ethical conduct. “Man should not permit himself to worship the spirit of holiness as though it were a deity (the Holy Ghost). No human being can be holy except by virtue of the holiness of his behavior toward his fellow-man. ‘Holiness’ and «spirit» supplement each other. ‘Holiness’ helps us to realize that ‘spirit’ is an aspect of conduct, and «spirit» helps us to realize that ‘holiness’ is an aspect of ethical reason.”⁷¹

Conclusions

Clearly, the concept of holiness advanced by Mordecai Kaplan is an expression of the fullness of humanity, not an essence of the personal God. For the Reconstructionists, this is more of an anthropological than a theological category. From the standpoint of tradition, such a concept of holiness leads to desacralization of Judaism, which may primarily be seen in the desacralization of God, the Torah, the Chosen People and the Sabbath. Based on the conducted analyses, it may be concluded that Kaplan’s proposal—though exceedingly interesting and spectacular—does entail desacralization. The Reconstructionist revaluation of Judaism has its specific corollaries. The traditional rituals and the functioning of the Jewish religion remain unchanged but their meaning undergoes considerable modification. Kaplan tried to find a modern “counterpart” (equivalent) to each of the key ideas in Judaism, including sanctity. It is simply construed as a transcendent importance or sublimity. People and the world are sacred in the sense that they possess a sublime, even cosmic and ultimate significance, and goal. Judaism is sacred inasmuch as it contributes to the accomplishment of the human goal understood as a complete fulfillment in this world. One may have the impression that Reconstructionism involved a complete reversal of the traditional values. What was merely a means in Judaism became the end, whereas the end became the means. What used to lead to sanctity became sanctity itself, the touchstone and the foundation of which is not found in God but in the human. It appears that instead of sanctifying the secular—as in traditional Judaism—the Reconstructionists profane that which was considered sacred. Even

⁷⁰ Cf. Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 121.

⁷¹ Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning*, 121–122.

allowing for the divergences of views and positions, which is normal in Judaism, Kaplan's concept of holiness represents a genuine revolution in contemporary Jewish thought.

Bibliography

- Cohen, J. – Scult, R. – Jospe, R., “Kaplan Mordecai,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Macmillan 1971) X, 751–753.
- Eisenstein, I., “Mordecai M. Kaplan,” *Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century* (ed. S. Noveck; Clinton, TN: The B'rith Department of Adult Jewish Education 1963) 253–279.
- Fisiak, J. – Adamiak-Sałaciak, A. (eds.), *Nowy słownik Fundacji Kościuszkowskiej angielsko-polski* (New York: Kosciuszko Foundation 2008) (= NSFK).
- Goldsmith, E.S., “Kaplan and Henry Nelson Wieman,” *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (eds. E.S. Goldsmith – M. Scult – R.M. Seltzer; New York – London: New York University Press 1990) 197–220.
- Hertzberg, A., “Introduction to the 1981 Edition,” M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (Philadelphia, PA – New York: The Jewish Publication Society of America and Reconstructionist Press 1981) XIX–XXXV.
- Jankowski, A., “Biblijne pojęcie świętości człowieka,” *Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny* 37/2 (1984) 109–118. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21906/rbl.1264>.
- Jelonek, T., *Biblijne pojęcie sacrum* (Kraków: WAM 2008).
- Kaplan, M.M., *Judaism in Transition* (New York: Behrman House 1936).
- Kaplan, M.M., “The Way I Have Come,” *Mordecai M. Kaplan. An Evaluation* (eds. I. Eisenstein – E. Kohn; New York: The Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation 1952) 283–321.
- Kaplan, M.M., *Judaism without Supernaturalism* (New York: Reconstructionist Press 1958).
- Kaplan, M.M., *The Greater Judaism in Making* (New York: Reconstructionist Press 1960).
- Kaplan, M.M., *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: Reconstructionist Press 1962).
- Kaplan, M.M., *The Purpose and Meaning of Jewish Existence* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America 1964).
- Kaplan, M.M., *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Reconstructionist Press 1967).
- Kaplan, M.M., *Questions Jews Ask. Reconstructionist Answer* (New York: The Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation 1972) 162–163.
- Kaplan, M.M., *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood* (New York: Macmillan 1972).
- Kaplan, M.M., *Judaism as a Civilization. Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (Philadelphia, PA – New York: Jewish Publication Society of America – Reconstructionist Press 1981).
- Kepnes, S., “Holiness: The Unique Form of Jewish Spirituality,” <https://www.jewishideas.org/article/holiness-unique-form-jewish-spirituality> (access 21.11.2020).
- Kohler, K., “Holiness,” *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls 1906) 439–442.

- Krawczyk, R., "Biblijna koncepcja świętości," *Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny* 67/4 (2014) 345–362.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21906/rbl.51>.
- Lazaroff, A., "Kaplan and John Dewey," *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (eds. E.S. Goldsmith – M. Scult – R.M. Seltzer; New York, London: New York University Press 1990) 173–196.
- Noveck, S., "Kaplan and Milton Steinberg: A Disciple's Agreements and Disagreements," *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (eds. E.S. Goldsmith – M. Scult – R.M. Seltzer; New York – London: New York University Press 1990) 140–170.
- Saldarini, A.J., "Świętość," *Encyklopedia biblijna* (ed. P.J. Achtemeier; Warszawa: Vocatio 1999) 1227.
- Scult, M., "Mordecai M. Kaplan: His Life," *Dynamic Judaism. The Essential Writings of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (eds. E. Goldsmith – M. Scult; New York: Fordham University Press 1991) 3–13.
- Szczerbiński, W., *Postulat nie-osobowego Boga. Rekonstrukcjonizm wyzwaniem dla teizmu żydowskiego* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza 2007).
- Szczerbiński, W., *Rekonstrukcjonistyczna desakralizacja judaizmu* (Poznań: Wydział Teologiczny. Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu 2021).
- Weisberg, H.C., "Mordecai M. Kaplan's Theory of Religion," *Mordecai M. Kaplan. An Evaluation* (eds. I. Eisenstein – E. Kohn; New York: The Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation 1952) 155–192.
- Zajac, E., "Judaizm jako religia uświęcająca czas," *Ethos* 25/3 (2012) 46–60.