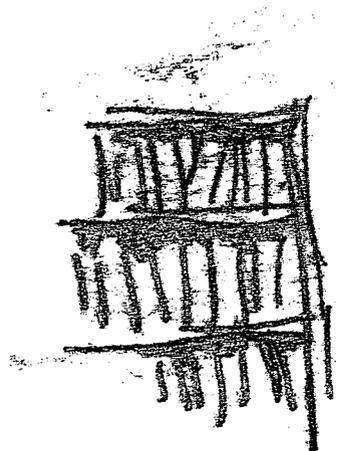


THE
CHAIN OF
TRADITION
SERIES

Volume III

THE
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Volume III:
Jewish thought today



*Illustrated by
Irwin Rosenhouse*



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SERIES

Jewish thought today

BY LOUIS JACOBS

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Introduction

FOR MORE THAN one hundred and fifty years Jewish thinkers have been concerned with understanding the role of Jews and Judaism in the modern world. This book contains the writings of some of these thinkers and by a careful reading of the selections presented here you will obtain a good idea of the new problems they had to deal with and the different ways they had of grappling with them.

Judaism in the past had been successful in coming to terms with various civilizations. The list of these is long—Babylonian, Egyptian, Canaanite, Assyrian, Persian, Greek, Roman, Christian, Islamic. It was impossible for Jews not to be influenced by the world around them, but they tried hard at the same time to remain true to their own faith. They tended to adopt the ways of the people among whom they resided when no basic Jewish principles were at stake, but to call a halt whenever there was a danger of accepting into Jewish life ways and ideas that would be harmful to the truth they had received by tradition.

Theoretically the problem of the Jew in the modern world was exactly the same as it had always been, but practically the situation was very different. For the first time Jews began to participate fully in the life of their neighbors and this to an extent unknown to previous ages. In the Western world, Jews became prominent among the philosophers, scientists, musicians, artists, lawyers, doctors, business-men and teachers. They made a decisive contribution to modern thought. For this

reason it was no longer a question of the Jewish people as an entity facing a challenge from without. The many conflicts between the old and the new were present in the souls of most educated Jews.

The problems Jews have had to cope with in the modern world are of two kinds; those peculiar to Jews and those common to all religions. To the first kind belong such questions as how far should Jews allow themselves to become assimilated to the outside world? how much Hebrew should be retained in the Synagogue? what is a Jew to do if the only way he can make a living is to work on the Sabbath? are the dietary laws still binding upon Jews? what is the role of Jewish peoplehood and, now, the State of Israel, in Jewish life? how can the Jew manage to be well informed about his own Jewish heritage if he has to spend so much time acquiring general culture and knowledge? As for the problems common to the adherents of other religions as well as the Jewish, these have to do with the breakdown of traditional theories on the nature of the universe. The earth is no longer seen as the center of the universe but the whole of our solar system is only a tiny speck in the vastnesses of space. From Darwin onward the view that man is descended from lower forms of life has won increasing acceptance. Marx and Freud questioned whether men are as rational as they like to imagine they are and have put forward the view that men are unconsciously motivated by social and economic forces (Marx) or by irrational strivings within themselves (Freud). The philosopher Kant in the eighteenth century questioned whether man can ever have any real knowledge of anything beyond his own world. The rise of modern science has encouraged men to look at their surroundings in terms of cause and effect so that, for example, the whole idea of God interrupting this sequence by performing miracles or in answer to prayer became more difficult to accept than in the earlier period. Moreover the scientific methods of letting the facts speak for themselves without preconceived notions were applied to the Biblical books and it was found, as a result, that many of the traditional positions as to the date and authorship of these were no longer tenable.

Yet Judaism has displayed its astonishing power of survival. A number of movements arose, for example, which differed from one another in matters of emphasis, and even on fundamental principles, but all of which had the effect of paving the way for the necessary re-adjustment so that Judaism might survive and hold its own with renewed vigor.

The first of these movements was the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment), the aim of which was to prepare the Jew for his life in the new world by introducing him to its culture. The "enlightened" Jew was to be thor-

oughly familiar with the great classics of Western thought as well as with his own literature. Allied to this was the movement known as *Jüdische Wissenschaft* (The Science of Judaism). The aim of this school was to study the Jewish past in a scientific way, that is to say, to examine, so far as this is possible, not what we imagine to have happened in Jewish history but what actually did happen. At a later date Zionism arose. The Zionists taught that the Jews were a nation like other nations and could only flourish if they had a land of their own. Eventually, Zionism led to the establishment of the State of Israel. The bitter fact that six million Jews were murdered by Hitler gave a tremendous impetus to the search for a secure home for the Jewish people so that such terrible happenings might never occur again. In the State of Israel the Hebrew language is spoken, the Bible is widely read, and the whole of society is pervaded by the Jewish spirit, though this is not to say that all the problems are now solved; there are, indeed, new ones such as the role of religion in the new State and relations between Jews and Arabs.

On the religious level three new movements arose. Neo-Orthodoxy bravely faces up to the challenge of the new both by becoming thoroughly acquainted with modern life and thought and by denying that anything which has happened during the past one hundred and fifty years renders in any way the past insights out of date. Reform Judaism accepts the challenge in a different way. It holds that the heart of Judaism is to be found in the teachings of the great Hebrew prophets and these, which speak in God's name of justice, righteousness and mercy in daily life, are still as valid as ever. As for the ritual observances, Reform is prepared to see value in many of these but does not consider them to be of supreme importance. Conservative Judaism holds on to a mid-way position. It believes that Orthodoxy is too rigid in its resistance to change and Reform too ready to throw overboard cherished institutions such as the dietary laws and the traditional way of Sabbath observance. Consequently, it tries to follow the traditional pattern but with greater openness and a fuller appreciation of its dynamic quality.

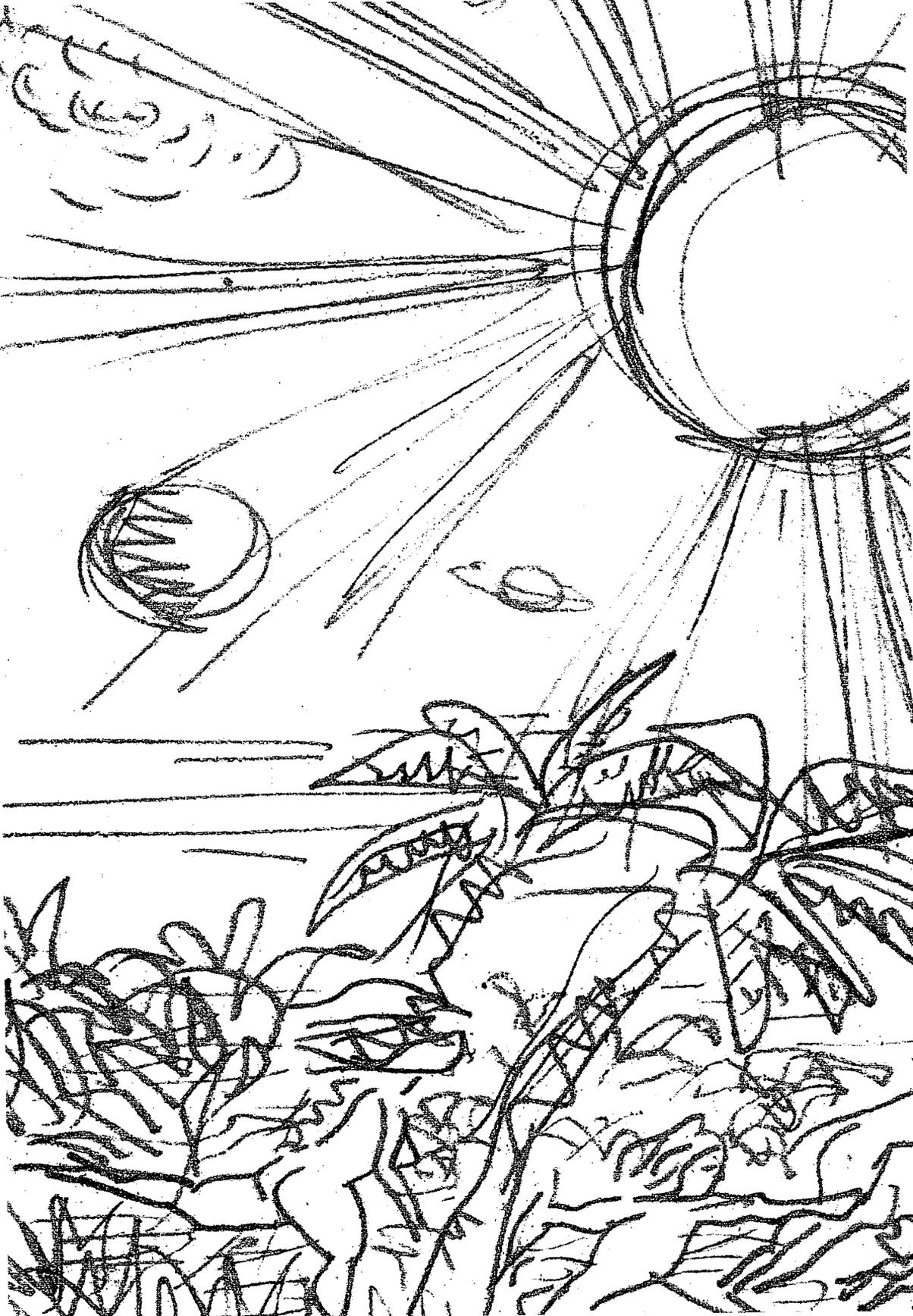
The thinkers who appear in these pages belong to one or another of these movements. They do not represent, therefore, anything like a uniform viewpoint. If you find yourself agreeing with everything all of them say you will be guilty of indulging in loose thinking since they disagree profoundly among themselves. It is hoped, nonetheless, that this book will be acceptable to the adherents of all the different groupings because it does not seek to propagate any single viewpoint but

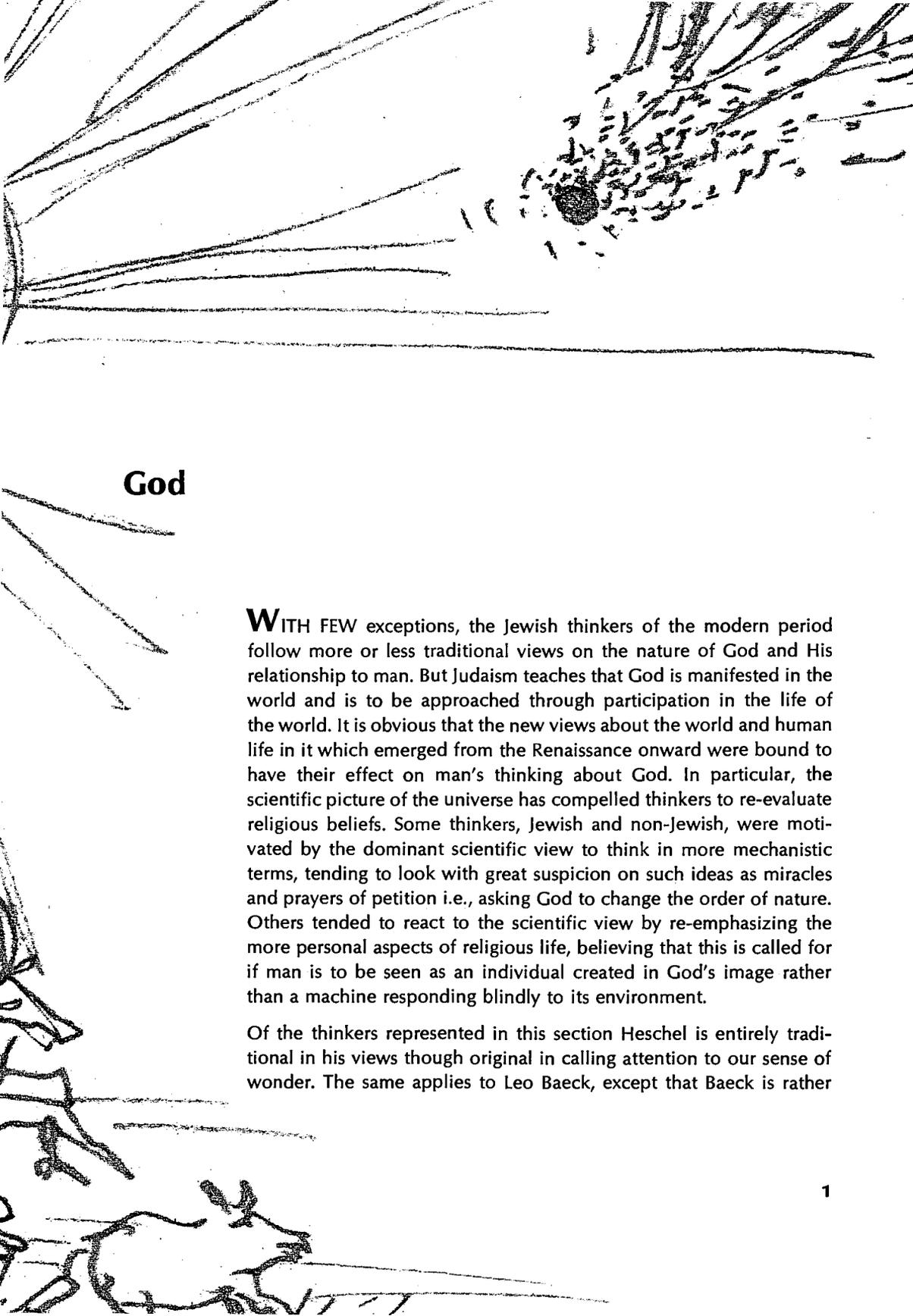
prefers to let the various thinkers speak for themselves. Whatever your own attitude to these questions, you will come to understand it better by examining the views of its opponents. The thinkers are not labeled according to their movements. That should encourage you to examine their ideas without prejudice.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I deals with the way new thought on the Jewish doctrine of God serves to place the doctrine in the central position it has always occupied in Judaism but with a number of fresh insights into its meaning. Part II considers the doctrine of the Torah as the revealed will of God and how this can be understood in the light of our present-day knowledge. Part III treats the doctrine of Jewish peoplehood and its relevance for modern Jewish life. There are other problems with regard to Jewish life in the present but all the main ones have to do with these three areas. The notes to the various texts give some background information and try otherwise to elucidate the meaning of the texts. This is particularly important because some of these writers occasionally tend to assume a knowledge of Jewish thought which the average intelligent Jewish reader cannot be expected to possess.

It remains to be said that the following are *selections* from Jewish writers and thinkers and should be seen as a beginning or an introduction to the understanding of Judaism in the world of today. If they encourage the reader to go on to study these weighty questions in greater depth and detail the book will have achieved its purpose. For the rest practically every serious Jewish book published today is concerned with one or more of the problems discussed in these pages.







God

WITH FEW exceptions, the Jewish thinkers of the modern period follow more or less traditional views on the nature of God and His relationship to man. But Judaism teaches that God is manifested in the world and is to be approached through participation in the life of the world. It is obvious that the new views about the world and human life in it which emerged from the Renaissance onward were bound to have their effect on man's thinking about God. In particular, the scientific picture of the universe has compelled thinkers to re-evaluate religious beliefs. Some thinkers, Jewish and non-Jewish, were motivated by the dominant scientific view to think in more mechanistic terms, tending to look with great suspicion on such ideas as miracles and prayers of petition i.e., asking God to change the order of nature. Others tended to react to the scientific view by re-emphasizing the more personal aspects of religious life, believing that this is called for if man is to be seen as an individual created in God's image rather than a machine responding blindly to its environment.

Of the thinkers represented in this section Heschel is entirely traditional in his views though original in calling attention to our sense of wonder. The same applies to Leo Baeck, except that Baeck is rather

more modern in style and language, utilizing the idiom of twentieth century thought. Buber, more than any other thinker, stresses the personal aspect of God. His distinction between man's approach to things and his approach to persons is one of the most fruitful religious ideas of our day. Mordecai Kaplan, on the other hand, is with the exception of Rubenstein, the most untraditional of the thinkers represented here, the one most influenced by the scientific picture. For Kaplan it is better to use terms like "Force" or "Power" when speaking of God, otherwise, there is, for him, the danger of thinking of God simply as a colossal human being, which is, of course, absurd. Rabbi Epstein is entirely traditional. Although he, too, uses the idiom of twentieth century thought, he, in fact, retains in its totality the medieval picture.

Many present-day religious thinkers hold that belief in God has to be taken on trust. It cannot be proved and reason has very little to do with it. Our selection on this theme is from the writings of Milton Steinberg, who is of the opinion that belief in God provides us, nonetheless, with the only reasonable account of human life and the universe as a whole. The most stubborn obstacle to faith is the horror of the Holocaust. Rubenstein accepts the critique, but Fackenheim shows how nonetheless faith is possible.

Epstein and Steinberg are fairly easy to follow. Kaplan, Heschel, Rubenstein and Fackenheim make rather heavier demands on concentration. Baeck and Buber, especially Buber, are very difficult and much effort is required to grasp their thought.

The way of reason

The reasonableness of belief in God.

Milton Steinberg (1903-1950), outstanding Rabbi, preacher and author, devoted a good deal of his short working life to examining the nature of the Jewish faith. The following selection is from the book compiled after Steinberg's death by Arthur A. Cohen, and contains Steinberg's essays on Judaism. The book is called Anatomy of Faith (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1960, pages 88-96). A few paragraphs have been omitted in order to give as much as possible of Steinberg's full argument within the scope of a few pages.

Religion's world outlook centers about God. Before attempting to indicate what we mean by that word, let us first make clear what we do not mean. "God" does not denote an old man on a throne somewhere up in the sky. That notion is in part a survival of the infancy of the human race, in part a hangover from our personal childhood, from those days when, having first heard about God and possessing only limited intellectual resources, we pictorialized Him according to our naïveté. However the conception is come by, it is far less innocent than is generally supposed. It impels many a person to regard himself as an atheist, simply because he does not believe that there really is an old man in the heavens. On the other hand, it condemns individuals capable of ripe spirituality to the stuntedness, perhaps life-long, of puerile, unsatisfying, and undignified convictions.

The naive picture, says Steinberg, is not merely wrong but positively harmful because it distorts in a very childish way the greatest idea of all.

To believe in God, maturely, intelligently, is to believe that reality did not just “happen,” that it is no accident, no pointless interplay of matter and energy. It is to insist rather that things, including man’s life, make sense, that they add up to something. It is to hold that the universe, physical and moral, is a cosmos, not an anarchy . . . meaningful rather than mad, because it is the manifestation of a creating, sustaining, animating, design-lending Spirit, a Mind-will, or to use the oldest, most familiar and best word, a God.

The word “cosmos” is from the Greek and means the universe as an ordered whole. Hence Steinberg argues that the only way of seeing the universe as a cosmos rather than an anarchy is to see it as the product of a Mind which orders and this is God.

Here at last we come to the crux of our investigation. Are there any reasons for maintaining that the world is of this character rather than that, that Deity rather than Nullity moves behind and through it? There are such reasons, not one but a number, all good, indeed compelling.

God is the only tenable explanation for the universe. Here we are, creatures of a day, in the midst of a vast, awesome world. Sometimes it strikes us as a big, blooming tumult. But through the seeming confusion some traits persist, constant and all-pervading. Thus, the universe is *one*, an organic unity, subject everywhere to the same law, knitted together with interdependence.

Again, it is *dynamic*, pulsating with energy, movement, life. It is *creative*, forever calling new things into being, from stars and solar systems to new breeds of animals, new ideas in the minds of men, new pictures on the artist’s canvas.

It is *rational* in the sense that everything in it behaves according to law! Electrons and protons according to the rules of their being, plants in harmony with their nature, animals after the patterns of their respective kinds, and man in consonance with the mandates not only of chemistry, physics, and biology but of psychology and the moral order as well. Everywhere: form, design, predictable recurrence, law.

The universe, furthermore, is *purposive*; at least it is in some of its phases. An insect laying its eggs in a place where the larvae yet to be born will be assured of food as they will require it; a spider weaving its web, a bird building a nest, an engineer designing a bridge, a young man charting his career, a government drawing up a policy, a prophet blueprinting a perfected mankind—all these are instances, rudimentary or advanced, conscious or instinctual, of planning ahead. Purposiveness is indisputably an aspect of reality, and no theory can be said to explain the latter if it does not account for the former as well.

The universe further contains *consciousness*. It has produced man. At least in him it discloses intelligence, a thirst for truth, sensitivity to beauty, a desire for goodness. And man is a component of reality. Whence it follows that no explanation of the entirety can be acceptable if it does not illumine the existence and nature of this most complex, challenging and mysterious of its components.

This then is the world in which we live: one, dynamic, creative, rational, and inclusive of elements of purpose, consciousness, and goodness. For such a universe the religious theory is by far the best “fit.” Only it accounts at all adequately for the striking features just enumerated. That is why men of all eras, cultures, and capacities, including most of the world’s great philosophers, have tended so generally to arrive, no matter what their point of departure, at some kind of God-faith. For, once one begins to reflect on the nature of things, this is the only plausible explanation for them.

Many thinkers have tried to prove the existence of God but many other thinkers, particularly in modern times, have argued that this cannot be done. Steinberg approaches the matter in a slightly different way. He asks us to consider which explanation of the world as we know it is better—that it is made by God or that it just happened. If this test is applied it becomes clear that the only explanation which fits the facts is the one that there is a God.

But what about the evil of the world? Can the God-idea account for that? Not entirely, and not to anyone’s complete satisfaction. This fact unquestionably counts against faith. On the other hand, there are many interpretations of evil from the religious viewpoint whereby its existence can be reconciled, partially if not thoroughly, with the existence of God.

But even if evil were a total mystery on which theology could not make so much as a dent, the God-faith would still be indicated. For, at the worst, it leaves less unexplained than does its alternative. If the believer has his troubles with evil, the atheist has more and graver difficulties to contend with. Reality stumps him altogether, leaving him baffled not by one consideration but by many, from the existence of natural law through the instinctual cunning of the insect to the brain of the genius and heart of the prophet.

This then is the intellectual reason for believing in God: that, though this belief is not free from difficulties, it stands out, head and shoulders, as the best answer to the riddle of the universe.

Steinberg does not deny that the problem of evil is very difficult. But his point is that against this problem has to be set all the reasons for God-faith he has mentioned earlier. So that what it amounts to is this, the believer in God has one terrible difficulty but the atheist has a whole host of difficulties because he can offer no explanation at all for reality as we know it.

The second reason for belief in God is that man cannot live joyously, hopefully, healthily, perhaps not at all, without it. Consider what the universe and man look like under the assumption of atheism.

Reality appears totally devoid of point or purpose. Like everything else, man is seen as a by-product of a blind machine, his history a goalless eddy in an equally directionless whirlpool, his ideals random sparks thrown off by physiochemical reaction in the colloidal solution, compounded by chance, which is his brain. Everything adds up in the end to exactly nothing.

What is the consequence of such a view for man and society? Can it be other than discouragement, demoralization, despair? What else shall one say of it except that "that way madness lies."

And Steinberg goes on to say that, granted belief in God, man can, for all his troubles, find security in the knowledge that God is on his side in the fight against evil and He assures us that the good will eventually win out. He quotes the verse: "Fear not: for they that are with us are more than they that are with them" (II Kings 6:16).

But is this fair to atheists? Have not some of them been among the most unselfish and self-forgetting of mortals? And on the other hand,

are not many of the most bestial and least idealistic of human beings religionists?

No, what we have just said, had it been said of atheists, would have been grossly unfair. But it does no injustice whatsoever to atheism, the inescapable effects of which are to trivialize ideals, to present the human enterprise as a futility, and so to undermine the classic ethic of justice, mercy, and self-negation on behalf of moral principle and human welfare.

But, if so, how is one to account for the goodness of so many irreligionists? Very simply. Men often behave better than their philosophy. Only they cannot be expected to persist in doing so. In the end, how a man thinks must affect how he acts; atheism must finally, if not in one generation then in several, remake the conduct of atheists in the light of its own logic.

Steinberg goes on to say that most atheists today are living by the morality originally taught by Judaism and through Judaism by Christianity and this morality stems from the Jewish belief in God. As someone has said, atheists who are moral are living on the spiritual capital stored up by their believing ancestors.

This statement of Steinberg is really a completely traditional approach to belief in God, though, naturally, he puts forward his argument in modern language and in terms of our present-day thought and experience.