

# How to Be Religious without Believing in God —and Why

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## Abstract

I once spent *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement) at a scientific conference in York, England, the site where Jews were massacred in 1190 C. E. while the King was away fighting a religious war. My friend from Bell Labs spent the morning grilling me as to why I was fasting and why I observe many other Jewish rituals, since I have no belief in God or for that matter anything transcendental. Why then do I affiliate myself with religious humanism rather than secular humanism?

Here briefly are my answers to these questions. (1) People seem to need religion and ritual, and rationalism will probably never replace them. (2) Religion is too important to be left to the scriptural literalists. (3) The Jewish culture is very rich and comprises much more than religion. (4) We may transvalue the *sancta* of a religion or culture to make them meaningful to modern people. (5) We may be universalists, but we are also tribal animals and more able to communicate with people who share similar background and culture. I hope to discuss your answers and your reactions at the workshop.

Reference: "How to Find Meaning in Religion without Believing in God," *Free Inquiry*, Summer, 2002, pp. 44-46; [www.mines.edu/~mmyoung/FIarticle.htm](http://www.mines.edu/~mmyoung/FIarticle.htm).

## Jewish Reconstructionism and Mordecai Kaplan's worldview

2 "civilizations"



Western

Jewish



Evolving religious civilization – Continuity of Jewish peoplehood

– Past has vote not veto

– Keep kosher, but

– Don't stone adulterers

– Polytheistic → Henotheistic → Monotheistic

Nontheistic (or atheistic) did not figure into Kaplan's worldview

– But it does into mine!

## The trinity according to Kaplan

Israel	God	Torah
↓	↓	↓
Peoplehood	Power that makes for	Not revealed by God
Both Zionism &	salvation	No personal Messiah
Diaspora	No intervention	<i>Halachah</i> [Jewish law]
No Chosen People	No intercessory prayer	not binding but
<i>Sancta</i> – Hebrew	No miracles	indicative of way
language,	Praying to TWIMC?	of life
history, music,		
dress, kashrut		

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*Sancta* – Objects, people, places, events that hold a special place or are deemed holy to a people

- Maccabees, Eretz Yisrael, Torah scrolls, Maimonides, the Exodus, Shabbat

Salvation – Destiny, fulfillment, ethical behavior

- In this world not next
- No hereafter

Transvaluation – Reevaluating old rituals in light of new values or understanding

- Ritual as means for group survival, not law
  - Freedom to drop if not meaningful to individual
  - Invent new meanings
- Keeping kosher → eating healthfully, environmentally soundly
- Messianism → working for the greater good of humanity

## **Cherin's retort**

Go find some other group to belong to

- Marx brothers movies with fellow expatriate New Yorkers each week

## **Young's rejoinder**

Rich heritage

- Literature, art, politics
- Helped shape my values, beliefs, outlook
- No reason to abandon in favor of another culture
  - Chaim Weizmann's grandmother [When Weizmann was asked why he could not accept a Jewish homeland outside Israel, he asked, roughly, "Why don't you visit some old lady who lives nearer than your grandmother?"]

## **Cherin's response**

Why mouth prayers you don't believe?

## **Young's riposte**

We are tribal and need to belong to a group

God meant figuratively, allegorically

- The Best in us is the God in us
  - IRA EISENSTEIN (a disciple of Kaplan)
- Eisenstein has it backward
  - MATT YOUNG (a disciple of Kaplan)

Religion too important to be left to orthodox

- Need to encourage liberal religion