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ON OUR COVER

Abraham Joshua Heschel in his office at the Jewish Theological Seminary, 1960.

Photograph by John H. Popper.

Courtesy of the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, Jewish Theological Seminary.

Abraham Joshua Heschel and Thomas Merton

Heretics of Modernity*

Shaul Magid

“. . . do not concern yourself with being modern. It is the only thing, unfortunately, no matter what you do, that you cannot avoid being.”

Salvador Dali

I

Abraham Joshua Heschel and Thomas Merton are anomalies as twentieth century religious figures.¹ They are simultaneously staunch defenders of tradition and sources of inspiration for those alienated *from* tradition. Their writings have become the subject of studies among scholars of religion yet the nature of their discourse does not easily lend itself to precise academic analysis.² They refused to abandon the popular audience of the contemporary “marketplace” even as each had the training and intellectual acumen to succeed in the elitist academy. As a result both remain, to a large degree, misunderstood. In this brief essay I will offer a preliminary analysis as to why these two spiritual icons remain largely misunderstood and why they have defied categorization and definition.

Peter Berger, well-known sociologist of religion and astute observer of the interface between tradition and modernity, divided modern religious ideologies into three major categories: modern, counter-modern and the de-modernizing.³ The first embraces modernity and views the progressive orientation of modern thought as redemptive. The second rejects modernity and sees it as “heretical.” The third uses modernity against itself, presenting tradition as a “liberation from the many discontents of modernity.”⁴ This demodernizing consciousness uses modern modes of communication and discourse

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as tools to deconstruct the edifice of modern ideology. Heschel and Merton defy all three of these categories, which is what makes their contributions so intriguing. They are simultaneously post-traditional defenders of tradition and modern critics of modernity.

In spite of their respective traditionalist critiques of the ills of modernity, they remained active participants in modern society, celebrating that fact throughout their lives, never intending that their pietistic religious critiques of modernity would be read as anti-modern, counter-modern or de-modernizing. This fact is particularly intriguing regarding Merton, whose secluded life as a monk and then a hermit never weakened his commitment to the contemporary issues outside the monastery. This can be readily seen in his voluminous correspondence throughout his years at Gethsemani.⁵ Merton described, criticized and even admonished modern civilization without abandoning his positive view of its potentiality. He described modernity as containing the “possibilities for an unexpected and almost unbelievable solution, the creation of a new world and a new civilization the like of which has never been seen.”⁶ Merton did not advocate the monastic perspective as an attempt to retrieve some distant romantic past but as a wholly modern alternative.⁷ The monk contributes to this possibility of “new world” by simultaneously remaining the bulwark of an unchanging Church and being intensely involved in contemporary social issues, serving as what Merton defines as “the representative of God in the world.”⁸ His assessment of modernity is not apocalyptic—he doesn’t see modernity as the darkness which precedes the eschatological dawn. Rather, he sees the awakened sparks of holiness around him, in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, in democracy, in the counter-culture of Haight Ashbury and Greenwich Village and in the spiritual renaissance from the East as all bearing the potential of a new era.⁹ Piety and the monastic vocation were never meant to liberate the individual from the modern dilemma. Rather, they offered ways in which the modern person could live *in* modernity, surviving and transforming a misguided culture dedicated to the proliferation of leisure as opposed to contemplation.¹⁰

This vision is encapsulated in Heschel’s thinking as well. His general commitment to social concerns is exemplified in his active vocal support of civil rights and the anti-war movements.¹¹ Referring to the American counter-culture of the sixties Heschel stated:

Young people are being driven into the inferno of the drug culture in search for high moments. Add to this the tremendous discontent of youth and its cry for justice of the disadvantaged, its disgust with half-hearted commitments and hypocrisies, and we may have the beginning of a thirst for the noble and the spiritual . . . This is the challenge. The new witnesses for a revival of the spirit in America may well be those poor miserable young men and women who are victims of the narcotic epidemic. If we will but heed the warning and try to understand their misguided search for exhaltation, we can begin the task of turning curse into blessing.¹²

Heschel identified with the counter-culture because he viewed Hasidism in a similar vein. Hasidism was, for Heschel, a form of religious reform.¹³ The Baal Shem Tov, in Heschel's estimation, was a religious rebel against the injustice and complacency of Eastern European rabbinic culture.¹⁴ The historical veracity of such a claim is not at stake here. Heschel's interest in Hasidim was not merely academic.¹⁵ Hasidism was, for Heschel, the foundation of a contemporary theology of Judaism. By giving us a "Hasidic" interpretation of Judaism for twentieth-century America, Heschel was not giving us a "traditional" interpretation, as he thought Hasidism was itself quite unconventional in its interpretation of tradition. In some ways, the early Hasidic masters, at least the way they are depicted in the literature of Heschel's time, bordered on being anti-traditional.¹⁶

In this light, I respectfully disagree with Eugene Borowitz's depiction of Heschel as a neo-traditionalist. Borowitz claims that Heschel "used the intellectual tools of modernity to move beyond his predecessor's procedures to a contemporary justification of traditional Jewish belief."¹⁷ Although Borowitz praises Heschel's creative contribution to contemporary theological discourse, he feels ultimately that Heschel fails as a modern Jewish thinker because he was unwilling to accept the full weight of the modern dilemma. "Again and again he begins an insightful discussion of a modern problem, shows its implications, and, just as one expects that he will respond to them, he says instead that from the standpoint of faith that is not the real question at all."¹⁸ Borowitz's reading of Heschel would most accurately fit into Berger's demodernizing camp (albeit in a unique manner) of one who uses the outer trappings of modernity to invalidate the modern experiment. I would suggest a subtler reading of Heschel's theological project which I believe emerges from a more intimate knowledge of the ways in which he integrates Hasidism as the basis of his radical "anti-traditionalist traditionalism." For example, Heschel's invalidation of a question from "the standpoint of faith" (citing Borowitz above) has a long history in Hasidism, from the Baal Shem Tov to R. Nahman of Bratzlav to Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk.¹⁹ We find many instances, apocryphal as they may be, that the Kotzker responds to a question by showing that the question itself rests on mistaken assumptions. Emil Fackenheim, in an essay entitled "Two Types of Reform: Reflections Occasioned by Hasidim" seems to have a similar point in mind when he says ". . . the liberal Jew who faces the Hasidic challenge must at this point turn from a problem of modern thought to a problem of modern life. Philosophical analysis shows that a religious effort to reopen communication with God is no offense to modern critical reason. The question still remains—and it is the vastly more complex and more difficult one—whether such an effort is a concrete possibility of modern life, as well as compatible with modern thought."²⁰ Instead of responding to a question built on the assumptions of "modern thought," Heschel may have responded by questioning those very assumptions, not by rejecting modernity but by turning the inquiry to a question of modern life. Be that as it may, Borowitz's reading is partially correct in that Heschel does serve as a translator of traditional ideas to late twentieth-century American

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Jewry, largely but not exclusively through the prism of Hasidism. However, I would maintain that Heschel's relationship to modernity (as was Merton's) was far more complex than merely a tool for translation.

Borowitz's critical appraisal of Heschel as a "neo-traditionalist" implies a kind of intellectual deception that I believe is overstated. Merton, who claimed merely to be "a mouthpiece of a tradition centuries old,"²¹ may have also been wrongly accused of neo-traditionalism. Both were unwilling to submit to the conventional modern norm of unbelief. That is, both did not accept the underlying "modern" assumption that faith is an illegitimate response to the modern dilemma. However, as we will see, their respective definitions of faith are far more conventional. Faith was not depicted as submission to a doctrine or truth claim but an orientation toward the world, a celebration of the mystery of creation, becoming open to the experience of that which lies beyond reason. In Heschel's words, faith is the "act of believing" as opposed to "creed," or that which we believe in. "The act of faith is an act of spiritual audacity not traditional conservatism."²²

The claim that both Heschel and Merton are merely defenders of tradition cloaked in modern theological language misses the core of their contribution to modern religious discourse because it misunderstands their critical/heretical call for a return to tradition as a position of retreat as opposed to internal critique. In religious discourse we often define defenders of tradition as those who take a stance against an outside threat to their system of belief or practice. These defenders often, but not always, fall into two general categories, "rejectionists," i.e., those who refuse to acknowledge any legitimacy to an ideological position which threatens their ideology or way of life, or "apologists," those who attempt to present tradition in the garments of modern language or ideas in order to defend the core of tradition against the onslaught of heretical belief.²³ Neither Heschel nor Merton fit into those categories, even in their widest interpretation, because their defense of tradition emerges from an internal critique of the tradition itself and their relationship to modernity was more than nominally tolerant or even positive; it is almost celebratory.

Heschel is a defender of tradition, yes, but not an apologist for it. He is a harsh critic of modernity, yes, but not one of its detractors. Heschel's "Pious One" and Merton's "Monk" are *responses* and not *solutions* to modernity.²⁴ Therefore, I would prefer to call both "heretics of modernity." By this I mean that both question and deeply criticize basic tenets of modernity but remain devoted to modern culture. Karl Rahner's distinction between the heretic, who remains a Christian, and the apostate who abandons the Church, is perhaps useful here.²⁵ Rahner argues that the heretic (as opposed to the apostate) still maintains the one saving reality which is "signified both by the truths that are maintained as well as by those that are denied."²⁶ For Rahner, heretical discourse lies within and not beyond the parameters of the ideology under scrutiny. Heresy, or that which is initially labeled as such, carries the potential to widen the boundaries of the tradition it scrutinizes. If it is successful in doing so, the label of heresy falls away and the critique becomes normalized into the tradition.²⁷ If it is unsuccessful, it dissolves or results in apostasy.

The formulation of "defense as retreat," embodied in the rejectionist position suggested above would represent, perhaps, an apostate of modernity, one who abandons modernity in favor of what he determines is a pre-modern and thus more pristine ideology. Alternatively "defense as critique," which I believe more accurately represents Heschel and Merton, is heretical in the most positive sense in that the individual protests yet remains devoted to the culture under scrutiny. Yet, Heschel and Merton were not only heretics of modernity. As defenders and adherents to traditional society coupled with their devotion and commitment to modernity, they became quasi-heretics of the tradition they sought to defend. Their re-formation and re-presentation of Jewish pietism and Christian monasticism placed them on the margins of their respective traditions because these traditional ideologies were set within and not against modernity. It is thus not surprising that both were viewed suspiciously by the mainstream traditionalists in their time.

Both were pietistic critics of tradition not unlike the way in which the Prophets and the Desert Fathers were critics of First Temple Israelite society and early Christianity. As was common in deeply spiritualistic critiques of a particular religion, the critic bases his/her critique on principles which are deeply rooted (albeit abandoned or marginalized) in the tradition itself, accompanied by an experience which allows for these subterranean strains to emerge. The individual's experience, which serves as a catalyst for lost ideals, is realized and accomplished in the form of what tradition may call an "error."²⁸ Concomitant with their attempts to build a foundation for modern pietism, Heschel and Merton attempted to uncover lost elements of their respective traditions buried deep beneath the blankets of religious institutionalization and convention.

Both Heschel and Merton achieved at least moderate success in the modern religious communities and the traditional world, yet both defied categorization precisely because each succeeded in widening the intellectual boundaries of both the modern and traditional communities simultaneously. As critics (yet defenders) of tradition and critics (yet participants) in modernity they lived on the margins of both worlds and, by exposing the weaknesses of both they created a bridge onto which individuals in both communities have begun to traverse.

One of the salient characteristics of both Heschel and Merton is that each used various aspects of tradition to criticize the contemporary society in which they lived without arguing that the entirety of the tradition should eclipse the world it challenged. Both thinkers wrote for moderns, not for its detractors.²⁹ Merton spoke of contemplative prayer as a "modern problem." He wrote about "the monk and the world"³⁰ and the monastic vocation as a "modern choice." Heschel faced modernity with a similar orientation. He presented the religious category of piety as that which speaks to the modern dilemma of apathy and the illegitimacy of faith. He did so by drawing a distinction between faith and piety that opens us to the possibility of viewing piety as an orientation and posture toward the world and not a requirement to believe.

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Faith is a way of thinking, and thus a matter of the mind; piety is a matter of life. Faith is a sense for the reality of the transcendent; piety is the taking of an adequate attitude toward it. Faith is vision, knowledge, belief, piety relation, judgment, an answer to a call, a mode of life. Faith belongs to the objective realm; piety stands entirely within the subjective and originates in human initiative . . . It is through piety that there comes the real revelation of the self, the disclosure of what is most delicate in the human soul, the unfolding of the purest elements in the human venture.³¹

Piety as an orientation toward the world as opposed to submission to doctrine is not something confined to any historical epoch. Heschel begins with the assumption that human beings are always forced to orient themselves to the world around them and must take stock of the numerous truth theories and ideologies that the modern world presents. Piety is presented in his essay as an alternative, admittedly one among many, but one that Heschel maintains speaks to the despair and meaninglessness so prevalent in modern society.³²

A second distinction Heschel suggested which he believed “corrected” conventional misunderstandings of piety is between faith and belief.

Belief is the mental acceptance of a proposition or a fact as true on the ground of the authority or evidence; the conviction of the truth of a given proposition or an alleged fact . . . [f]aith, on the other hand, is not only the ascent to a proposition, but the staking of a whole life on the truth of an invisible reality.³³

Belief is problematic for two reasons. First, belief has an object, be it an idea, dogma or proposition. As a conviction, belief closes rather than opens the possibility of experiencing the ineffable. Second, belief, Heschel argued, is centered on the self, the personal conviction of a truth claim.³⁴ Alternatively, faith begins and ends with uncertainty. Faith has no object but is “the staking of a whole life on the *truth of an invisible event*.”³⁵ It is faith and not belief that challenges the certainty implicit in the scientific world-view which Heschel so passionately rallied against. The ineffable event, which Heschel held was the foundation of Prophetic Judaism, is only possible when we “come to terms with our desire for intellectual security . . .”³⁶ By this he means that we must submit to the limits of knowledge before we can become open to the vistas of religion. Insecurity, and not certainty, is the foundation of Heschel’s theology of Judaism.

II

Both Heschel and Merton present prayer, in its widest sense, as the apex of the pious life.³⁷ Yet they argue that prayer is an act which is widely misunderstood. The misunderstanding and diminished value of prayer is viewed as one of the great tragedies of modern religion. Heschel and Merton each devote a separate volume to prayer in an attempt to re-present prayer to the modern reader in a new way which maintains its traditional valence and form but sheds new light on prayer as a response to the human beings’ experience of

the world. Both independently speak of prayer as poetry, about the need for the aesthetic to precede the ascetic, for the appreciation, beauty and wonder of creation to become part of one's choice to abstain from it.³⁸ Prayer is essentially an ascetic act precisely because it demands a posture which fosters an appreciation of the inner-life as the mystery of the divine and not as the reflection of the self. In a sense, the ascetic nature of prayer is that it denies the modern assumption that the inner-life is "dominated by the spirit reflection and self-consciousness."³⁹ It is only the ascetic denial of the all-encompassing nature of self and subjectivity that makes true love of the world, i.e., the aesthetic, possible. Yet the ascetic without the aesthetic is also destructive.

[If one begins with the] pretext that what is within is in fact real, spiritual, supernatural etc. one cultivates neglect and contempt for the external as worldly, sensual, material and opposed to grace. This is bad theology and bad asceticism. In fact, it is bad in every respect, because instead of accepting reality as it is, we reject it in order to explore some perfect realm of abstract ideals which in fact has no reality at all . . . Mediation has no point unless it is firmly rooted in life. Without such roots, it can produce nothing but the ashen fruits of disgust, *acedia*, and even morbid and degenerative introversion, masochism, dolorism, and negation.⁴⁰

For Merton prayer aids in the modern attempt to balance between a denial of the world via asceticism, seeing the world as evil; and a denial of the world via radical subjectivism, seeing the entirety of the real as a reflection of subjective reflection.

Underlying Heschel's discussions on prayer is the classical Jewish connection between prayer and sacrifice, seeing both as expressing an abandonment of self to facilitate self-discovery. Self-discovery for Heschel is not the discovery of the unconscious or one's inner-self, but the discovery of the mystery of God, the part of oneself that is beyond the self.

The focus of prayer is not the self. . . Prayer comes to pass in a complete turning of the heart toward God, toward His goodness and power. It is the momentary disregard for our personal concerns, the absence of self-centered thoughts, which constitute the act of prayer. Feeling becomes prayer in the moment we forget ourselves and become aware of God.⁴¹

Heschel attempts to correct the misconception of prayer and asceticism as negation of the world by stressing the poetic power of the liturgy, seeing the poetic as a deep appreciation of nature which serves as a foundation for asceticism in general and prayer in particular. Just as prayer is a "sacrificial offering," the ascetic life is envisioned as "gift-giving." "True asceticism is not merely depriving ourselves but is giving God what was precious to us."⁴² For Heschel the aesthetic appreciation of the beauty of nature requires an offering to the Master of Creation, a turning from the world to God and only then a turning back to the world.

Merton also equates prayer with poetry. Prayer releases the spiritual

potency in creation and enables the worshiper to share in the relationship between God and the world.

The words of a poem are not merely the signs of concepts; they are also rich in affective and spiritual associations . . . [The poet] seeks above all to put words together in such a way that they exercise a mysterious and vital reactivity among themselves, and so release their secret content of associations to produce in the reader an experience that enriches the depth of the spirit in a manner quite unique.⁴³

His discussion of poetry in general leads to an understanding of the Psalms as religious poetry which contain unique characteristics but never transcends the purely poetic. "The real content of the Psalter," says Merton "is poetic."⁴⁴ Merton continues, "since the inspired writer [of the Psalms] is an instrument of the Holy Spirit, what is revealed . . . is the poetry of the Psalter and is only fully apprehended in the poetic experience of the inspired writer."

Prayer, like poetry, is presented as an expression of love. Merton's description of the monk is one who is madly in love with God. Hence for the monk, prayer is the embodiment of his entire vocation. The monk's love of God is such that he cannot bear to be apart from Him. To illustrate this point Merton offers an interesting midrashic rendition of Exodus 33:20 and 33:13 by reversing the order of the verses, putting Moses' request for divine presence "Show me Thy face" as a response to God saying, "No one shall see My face and live,"⁴⁵ instead of the request being that which evokes God's response. The monk persists in crying out with Moses' "Show me Thy face"⁴⁶ even after, or precisely after, God denies His presence. Moses (and the monk's) protest is based on the fact that they are both madly in love and as such, cannot bear divine absence, even as such absence is decreed by God Himself.

Whereas Merton uses the early Christian Egyptian Desert Fathers as a source for his "reform" of monastic life and presentation of the monastic journey as a modern alternative,⁴⁷ Heschel uses Hasidism. Describing the contribution of Hasidism, which largely served as the wellspring of tradition from which Heschel drank, he says, "To be a Hasid is to be in love, to be in love with God and with what He has created . . . he who has never been in love will not understand and may consider it madness."⁴⁸ Prayer as sacrifice is, for Heschel, "man's gift to God, it is a love offering that heals the break between God and the world."⁴⁹ The traditional liturgy of prayer is the love poetry between the Jew and God. "Worship is the climax of living. There is no knowledge without love, no truth without praise. At the beginning was the song, and praise is man's response to the never-ending beginning."⁵⁰ But the Hasid's love for God, even as it is understood as a sacrifice, is not expressed as negation of the world. Prayer does not negate the world, it redeems it by making translucent the opaque walls that conceal the divine dimension *in* creation. Worship does not transcend the world—it transforms it.

Both attempt to lift the sacred core of ancient notions of devotion and sacrifice from their cultural contexts and present them as models which have relevance in the contemporary world. Both share the prophetic sensitivity

which enables them to see the divinity which lies buried in the externals of tradition and secularism. Therefore, they do not see a contradiction defending the Church Fathers or Hasidic Masters in the public square of American secular culture. They do not defend tradition from the onslaught of modernity. Rather, they suggest that modernity too can become holy precisely because holiness demands self-reflection and a recognition of the vitality of the inner-life, both of which, being innately human and not merely cultural categories, find expression in these premodern spiritual models.

Prayer and the larger devotional life are not subsumed in the structures of ritual, even as ritual remains the centerpiece of the devotional life. Both see devotion as an orientation and posture toward the world. Ritual may symbolize and externalize that posture but not encompass it. Moreover, the broader definition of devotion as an orientation toward life and not merely the performance of prescribed rituals cannot be solely the inheritance of one historical epoch (i.e., rabbinic Judaism or the medieval Catholic Church)—it is a natural and healthy externalization of the human experience. Answering the rhetorical question as to “Why do we pray?” Heschel responds, “we pray because we are human!” or “we pray in order to pray.”⁵¹ He is simultaneously not willing to relegate prayer to commandment, yet not willing to abandon the obligatory nature of prayer. Heschel’s model of piety is not a commitment to a particular “deed” but a commitment to “the way,” to the process of self-discovery and discovery of God.⁵²

A similar re-formulation of a life of devotion and worship enables Merton to speak of “bad asceticism” as that which negates the world, as opposed to an asceticism that ultimately appreciates and loves the world. Merton is in agreement with Heschel’s prophetic lamentation of the proliferation of empty ritual in contemporary Jewish religiosity.⁵³ We have abandoned ritual, both intimate, because we have refused to see beneath the outer garments of ritual as mere obedience. The actual form that piety takes is dynamic even though both defend, adopt, and integrate classical forms of piety into their own spiritual lives. In this light I believe that they offer a highly un-traditional defense of tradition, perhaps even an anti-traditionalist defense of tradition, which makes them simultaneously marginal in the world they are defending⁵⁴ and the world they seek to heal. They are both misunderstood and important precisely because they live deeply in the world they critique and thus defy the sharp lines of sociological classification.

Both celebrate sacrifice as the ladder which allows one to ascend the stone wall of false autonomy and recognize that certainty is not a religious posture. One needs to enter into the darkness of mystery in order to discover the divine light concealed under the veil of absence. Radical autonomy is the false idol of modernity, yet both attempt to deconstruct the idol while remaining members of the culture that constructed it.⁵⁵ For example, the foundation of prayer for Heschel is despair and the unwillingness to succumb to that despair. In concert with Hasidic doctrine, prayer for Heschel is the radical rejection of destiny, the recognition of the frailty of the human condition and the unwillingness to

accept one's fallen state as final. Deeply embedded in Heschel's Jewish theology is the Hasidic dialectic between the pietistic notion of one's utter dependence on God and the kabbalistic notion of *tikkun*, the individual's ability to overcome adversity and redeem the world. Yet the very rejection of human frailty must first confront the despair and apparent emptiness of existence.

Another dimension of their thought which seeks to deepen the symbiosis between tradition and modernity is that neither seeks to counter modernity by retrieving a romanticized vision of a forgotten past. Even as Heschel may romanticize Eastern European shtetl life before the First World War in *The Earth is the Lord's*, he does so as a eulogizer, lamenting the loss of a great period of Jewish history. Heschel may be implying that the shtetl may have something to teach us, but he does not in my view seek to retrieve it. Rather, both he and Merton seek to heal modernity, to awaken the inner-life within us, to ask us to re-consider piety and the contemplative life as more than a relic of an unenlightened society. Both recognize the "heretical imperative"⁵⁶ of modernity as much as they both acknowledge the necessity of such heresy. As traditionalists they deeply understood the ways in which modernity has moved beyond the perimeters of traditional theological and philosophical categories. Rather than lamenting this rupture and mourning the loss of innocence and purity of spirit, they celebrate the potential that lies beneath the modern project. Hence, as moderns they raise their voices in protest against the society in which they live, challenging us to look beyond ourselves by looking into ourselves.

It is not insignificant that Heschel never returned to the ultra-Orthodox world from which he came, and Merton's spiritual development marginalized him from the monastic community in which he lived. The spiritual sustenance each found in their respective traditions never diminished their intellectual curiosity. Piety never led to isolation. In the spirit of true heretics they never abandoned the world they challenged. Instead, their heresy of modernity simultaneously became our convention and inspiration. Heschel taught us what it is to be a Hasid in a world where Hasidism is anathema and Merton taught us how to appreciate the monk which conventional modern intuition slights as "non-productive" and thus a parasite of our society.⁵⁷ Like spiritual Zarathustras they made us see the extent to which our productive lives are missing a center; that life is like a cone where the center simultaneously hovers above and within the circumference of the circle. The center is silence, contemplation, devotion, and sacrifice. The center is the realization that the goal of existence is the exaltation and not conquest of the world around us. Activism remains; modernity survives. But it does so with a gentle whisper and not a bellowing horn. Their contribution is that they have taught us to be modern and yet remain human, while teaching us that becoming God-like *is* becoming human.

These two contemporary spiritual voices of faith sought to re-formulate the tradition they loved and lovingly criticize the world they lived in. They simultaneously accepted and challenged the heretical imperative of modernity by

becoming “heretics of modernity.” The tradition which was abandoned in a modern society was abandoned for good reason. But, they argue, embedded in the essence of those respective traditions lies the secret meaning of being human. In both we see the daring life of the “double-critic,” the one who criticizes tradition yet uses tradition to criticize modernity. Abraham Joshua Heschel and Thomas Merton: inspiring, confusing, playing both sides against the other. We have only begun to understand what it was they were all about.

NOTES

* An earlier version of this paper was delivered at a conference entitled *Thomas Merton's Prophetic Stance* at the Corpus Christi Church, New York City, November 16, 1997. I'd like to thank Brenda Fitch Fairaday for giving me the opportunity to participate.

1. Thomas Merton (1921–1969), Trappist monk, political activist, writer and poet, was an inspiration for a whole generation of Christians seeking spiritual meaning in Catholicism, particularly in the monastic tradition. His autobiography, *Seven Storey Mountain*, told the story of a spiritual journey almost unparalleled in twentieth-century literature. He corresponded with Heschel during the 1960s on the issues of civil rights, spiritual renewal and ecumenical dialogue. Some of that correspondence was printed in the multi-volume collection of Merton's letters. See also Edward Kaplan, “Contemplative Inwardness and Prophetic Action: Thomas Merton's Dialogue With Judaism” in *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Progress*, ed. Donald Grayston and Michael W. Higgins (Toronto, 1983), pp. 85–105.

2. For a recent study which illuminates various methods of reading Heschel see Edward Kaplan, *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Poetics of Piety* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), esp. pp. 19–32.

3. Peter Berger, *Homeless Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 159–178.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

5. See, for example, *Thomas Merton: The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985).

6. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), p. 173.

7. See Thomas F. McKenna, C.M., “A Voice in the Postmodern Wilderness: Merton on Monastic Renewal” in *The Thomas Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality and Social Concerns*, 8 (1995), pp. 122–137.

8. See *The Silent Life*, “Epilogue,” pp. 172–176.

9. On Merton's sustained argument for civil rights see the collection of essays in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (1968) and *idem. Thomas Merton on Peace*, ed. Gordon Zahn (1971). Cf. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968) and the recent publication of *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays of Thomas Merton*, William H. Shannon ed. and introduction (New York, 1995). His three books on religions of the east are *Mystics and the Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York, New Directions, 1968) and *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973). Cf. Thomas Merton, “Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom” in *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Image Books, 1974), pp. 295–303, William F. Healy, “Thomas Merton's Evaluation of Zen” *Angelicum* 52 (1975), pp. 385–409, Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 75–95 and Robert Faricy, “Thomas Merton and Zen” *The Thomas Merton Annual* 9 (1997), pp. 142–151.

10. See Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Image Books, 1973), p. 178 and McKenna, p. 130, 131. See also Thomas Merton, “Readings on the Modern World” in *The Collected Essays of Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: 1966). In some sense Merton views modern American culture similar to the way Rabbi Abraham Isaac Ha-Kohen Kook viewed the secular Zionist pioneers in Palestine in the early twentieth century. Rabbi Kook

argued that the secular Zionist ideologues were caught up, unconsciously or not, in the redemptive wave which would yield the messianic era. His positive affirmation of their lives, even as they may have been rooted in the heretical rejection of traditional Judaism, is based on his belief, not unfounded in Jewish mystical sources, that progressive heresy may be a necessary prerequisite for redemption. Merton's participation in and acceptance of many modern tenets which his monastic order rejected may have similar foundations, taking into account the extent to which Christian and Jewish eschatological visions are quite different. For an essay on this phenomenon in Rabbi Kook see Benjamin Ish-Shalom, "Tolerance and its Theoretical Basis in the Teachings of Rabbi Kook" in Lawrence Kaplan and David Shatz, eds., *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 178–204.

11. See Heschel, "The Reasons For My Involvement in the Peace Movement" reprinted in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), pp. 224–226. Heschel made numerous comments about the drug culture which were quite unorthodox for a "neo-traditionalist." Cf. In "In Search of Exaltation" in *Moral Grandeur*, pp. 227–229. For Merton's view of this phenomenon see "Mysticism in Man's Life" in *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1951), pp. 3–18.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

13. Heschel was not the first to see Hasidism in that light. Buber presented Hasidism as religious reform in the early part of the century. Even as Buber was justifiably criticized for his overly romantic view of Hasidism and his use of Hasidic sources to support his rejection of tradition, his influence was far-reaching. Heschel, who knew Hasidism from the inside, came to similar conclusions. See Martin Buber, *Die Chassidischen Buecher* (Berlin, 1921), p. 130 ff., *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), pp. 89–112 and Samuel Abba Horodetzky, *Rabbi Nachman von Brazlaw* (Berlin, 1910). Samuel Dresner, the most celebrated proponent of Heschel's Hasidic scholarship and influence, summed up Heschel's view as follows: "Hasidic teaching in its authentic form must be made available now in order to bring about the renaissance of modern Judaism for which our time and our people wait." Samuel Dresner, *The Zaddik* (London and New York: Abelard Schuman, 1960), p. 18. Dresner also says that "For Heschel, Hasidism was neither romanticism, rebellion, nor an affirmation of orthodoxy." See his "Heschel as a Hasidic Scholar" in *Circle of the Baal Shem Tov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. xxiv. I would maintain, however, that Heschel did indeed view Hasidism as critique and moderate reform. See also the fascinating essay by Emil Fackenheim, "Two Types of Reform: Reflections Occasioned by Hasidism" in *CCAR Yearbook LXXI* (1961), pp. 208–228, esp. p. 217, "Whereas the Western rationalist reform seeks to free the life of the human intellect, the Eastern Hasidic reform seeks to free the life between man and God." Although this is largely a Buberian formulation, Heschel's thinking on this matter is quite similar yet far more textually nuanced.

14. See his scholarly studies collected and translated in Samuel Dresner, *Circle of the Baal Shem Tov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), Cf. Heschel, "Hasidism as a New Approach to Torah" *Jewish Heritage* 14–3 (Fall- Winter 1972), pp. 4–21 reprinted in *Moral Grandeur*, pp. 33–39. Cf. Steven T. Katz, "Abraham Joshua Heschel and Hasidism" in *The Journal of Religion* 54–3 (July 1974), pp. 185–198.

15. See Samuel Dresner, "Heschel as a Scholar of Hasidism" in *Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, pp. vii–xlv.

16. We must take into account Moshe Rosman's new study *The Baal Shem Tov: The Founder of Hasidism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996) and various other studies which question the historical depiction of the radical and rebellious nature of the early masters. Cf. Ada Rapaport Alpert, "Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism" in *Essays in Jewish Historiography*, A. Rapaport-Albert ed. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 119–159 and idem. "Hasidism After 1772: Structural Continuity and Change" in Ada Rapaport-Albert, *Hasidism Reappraised* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1997), pp. 70–140. Be that as it may, Heschel used Hasidism to justify many of his personal responses to the culture around him.

17. Eugene Borowitz, *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: Behrman House, 1983), p. 167.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 180. Borowitz's critique of Heschel echoes many other Jewish "philosophers" who could not accept the decidedly un-philosophical nature of Heschelian discourse. For perhaps the most severe critique see Arthur Cohen, *The Natural and Supernatural Jew* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), pp. 234–259. I'd like to thank Shai Held for bringing this chapter to my attention. One of the more subtle and philosophically sophisticated, albeit quite harsh, critiques of Heschel's argumentation can be found in Emil Fackenheim's review of *Man is Not Alone* in *Judaism* (January 1952), pp. 85–89.

19. The most sustained presentation of this phenomenon can be found in R. Nahman of Bratzlav's tale, "The Wise Man and the Simpleton." Cf. Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973) and his two-volume Yiddish study, *Kotzk: In Gerangel far Emesdikeit* (Tel Aviv, 1973).

20. Emil Fackenheim, "Two Types of Reform," pp. 221, 222.

21. *The Silent Life*, "Prologue," pp. vii–xiv.

22. Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951), p. 167.

23. I present these two categories only to suggest two general orientations. These two approaches do not encompass the entirety of traditionalist responses to modernity. For a wide-ranging study of this phenomenon see Mordechai Breuer, *Modernity within Tradition: The Social History of Orthodox Jewry in Imperial Germany*; translated by Elizabeth Petuchowski (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

24. The chapter "The Pious One" is the final chapter in Heschel's *Man is Not Alone*, pp. 273–296. This chapter appeared in a slightly different form as "An Analysis of Piety" in *The Review of Religion* 6–3 (March 1942), pp. 293–307 and reprinted in *Moral Grandeur*, pp. 305–317. Cf. *Ibid.*, "The Holy Dimension," pp. 318–328. Merton speaks of the vocation of the monk in numerous books. See, for example, *The Silent Life* and *Monastic Journey* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), esp. pp. 19–61.

25. Karl Rahner, *On Heresy* (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), pp. 26, 27. For earlier studies on this matter which illuminate the complexities of the relationship between "orthodoxy" and heresy see Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, trans. Roberty Craft, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) and Walter L. Wakefield and Austin P. Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), esp. pp. 1–67.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

27. On this see Menahem Kellner, "What is Jewish Heresy?" *Studies in Jewish Philosophy* iii, ed. Norbert Samuelson (New York, 1983), pp. 55–70.

28. Both Heschel and Merton subtly attempt to re-introduce traditional ideas which they claim have been discarded by their respective religions. Heschel's "theology of pathos" which serves as the foundation of *Man is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man* is founded on what he determines as the prophetic message first presented in his doctoral dissertation *Die Prophetie* (Cracow, 1926), later revised and translated as *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). Merton sought out the early Christian Egyptian desert dwellers as his model of the authentic monastic life which was used as a critique of the contemporary monastic orders which he felt had become institutionalized and overly secure. See Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960) and McKenna, pp. 126–129.

29. Even as Merton composed various works specifically for the monks at Gethsemani, his language was contemporary and one could argue that these works were attempts to subtly reform the monastic life from the inside. See *The Monastic Journey* as an example of such a book.

30. See *The Silent Life*, "Epilogue."

31. Heschel, "An Analysis of Piety" in *Moral Grandeur*, p. 310. Cf. his discussion on faith in *Man is Not Alone*, pp. 159–176. For a similar formulation in an apologetic context see Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), pp. 118–119.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

33. See *Man is Not Alone*, pp. 166, 167.

34. For a study of the place of "self" in the Jewish mystical tradition which enlightens some of Heschel's more opaque comments see Alexander Altmann, "God and Self" in *Jewish Mysticism*, *Judaism* 3 (1954), pp. 1–5.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Heschel's book-length study of prayer entitled *Quest for God* [originally published as *Man's Quest for God*] (New York: Scribner, 1954) was augmented by various other essays and lectures Heschel gave on other dimensions of prayer. See, for example in *Moral Grandeur*, "The Spirit of Jewish Prayer," pp. 100–126, "Prayer," pp. 257–267.

38. On this see Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1971). This work is a composite of two manuscripts, "The Climate of Monastic Prayer" written for the monks at Gethsemani and circulated privately, and "Prayer as Worship and Experience" written for a general audience, published for the first time in *Contemplative Prayer*. For a thorough discussion of the complex construction of this book see William Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987), Chapter 7.

39. See Emil Fackenheim, "Two Types of Reform," p. 222. For another non-traditional formulation of asceticism as a necessary component of the religious life see Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism*, p. 269.

40. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 38.

41. "Prayer" in *Moral Grandeur*, pp. 348–349. A similar formulation is made by Emil Fackenheim in "Two Types of Reform," pp. 215, 216, ". . . Jewish prayer, once between a "subjective" self and an "objective" God, is viewed [in modern discourse] as the self's disport with its own feelings, conducive to aesthetic or therapeutic benefit."

42. "An Analysis of Piety," *ibid.*, p. 315.

43. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, cited in *A Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962), p. 388.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 389.

45. *The Silent Life*, p. x.

46. *Ibid.*

47. See McKenna, "A Voice in the Postmodern Wilderness," pp. 126–127 and Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960).

48. Heschel, "Hasidism as a New Approach to Torah," reprinted in *Moral Grandeur*, pp. 33–39.

49. Heschel, "On Prayer," reprinted in *Moral Grandeur*, p. 259.

50. *Ibid.* p. 263.

51. The first definition was suggested by Samuel Dresner in a private conversation, the second can be found in Heschel's "On Prayer" in *Moral Grandeur*, p. 259.

52. On this see Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, pp. 267–270.

53. On Heschel's "pan-halakhic" view see his "Toward an Understanding of Halakha" reprinted in *Moral Grandeur*, pp. 127–145. For a critical appraisal of Heschel's attitude toward halakhah see Marvin Fox, "Heschel, Intuition and Halakha" *Tradition* 3:1 (Fall 1960), pp. 5–15.

54. In a letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether on May 5, 1967, Merton wrote, "I am now convinced that the first way to be a desert monk is to be a non-monk and an anti-monk, so far as the image goes." See *Thomas Merton the Hidden Ground of Love*, p. vii.

55. See Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: Prelude to the Asian Journals* (New York: New Directions, 1988), pp. 76–78.

56. This phrase is taken from Peter Berger's *Heretical Imperative* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), pp. 1–30, which argues that modernity begins with what its antecedents would determine as heresy and then continues to build the edifice of modernity on those foundations.

57. *The Silent Life*, p. viii.