

## Building Blocks to a Contemporary Jewish Theology

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In his essay, “A Program for a Positive Jewish Theology,” Steven Kepnes identifies a strategy, through theological realism, that is designed to enable religious truth claims to provide some sort of meaningful reference. He embraces this task after acknowledging some of the ways in which modern philosophical critiques challenge the grounds for constructing contemporary faith, raising questions about how meaning can be attributed to religious language when it references ideas that lie wholly outside of our experience.

Kepnes’s efforts could be seen to offer a response to the increasing urgency in some sectors to identify methodologies for defending the reasonableness of faith. This reflects the broader context of a post-secular age in which a yearning for sacralization—in place of secularization—has been building. Yet, under the influence of some of the same philosophical critiques that he tries to overcome, post-secularism by its nature has a tendency to challenge established religions and the types of religious authority and truth claims upon which they are built. Religion might have been resurrected as a possible means for trying to make sense of the world, as the secularization thesis has been questioned, but it is merely one option among a variety of others. Any claims to certainty are challenged as religion is expected to adapt to a spiritual marketplace.<sup>1</sup>

In responding to Kepnes’s paper, I want to set out an alternative, non-realist, ritual-oriented methodology for constructing a contemporary Jewish theology. Recognizing the challenges of our times, this is designed to offer a model for nurturing a simultaneously committed yet questioning account of Jewish faith. Although I understand the undoubted appeal of seeking to construct a positive Jewish theology, I question the necessity of pursuing such an undertaking, since it appears there is scope within Jewish teachings for defending an alternative approach. I argue below that potential building blocks for constructing a path to the type of non-realist faith that I wish to outline can be identified in the theology of Louis Jacobs. This twentieth century British scholar-rabbi, who contributed to the emergence of Masorti Judaism in Britain, offers a theological model that seeks to address some of the challenges of the contemporary quest for faith. There are certain limitations that characterize Jacobs’s theology, impeding its transmissibility. Consequently, I introduce ideas from the psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott to help make better sense of how Jacobs’s strategy for nurturing a committed yet questioning Judaism can be implemented. This builds on Jacobs’s account of how a commitment to the three central pillars of ritual, study, and community can nurture attachments to Judaism that have the potential to empower theological seekers to navigate between faith and doubt. While drawing on the shifting interpretations of religious authority and propositional truth claims that underpin Kepnes’s paper, this leads to a somewhat different response.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the idea that we are living in post-secular times has been challenged, in broad terms it indicates how the predicted march towards secularization, as a consequence of Enlightenment thought, has not materialized as expected. See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 17–29; H. de Vries and L. E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Religion in a Post-Secular World* (New York, 2006); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, 2003).

### The Challenge of Contemporary Faith

The contemporary challenge to faith builds from an underlying questioning of how we can hope to make sense of religious belief when the grounds for defending its central premises are critiqued from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Steven Kepnes eloquently captures some of the difficulties of articulating a contemporary faith in his defense of a positive Jewish theology. As he explains, in its development: “Modern philosophy, with its criteria for what counts as ‘knowledge,’ declares that theology cannot be considered a form of knowledge. At best it is speculation, and at worst it is illusion.” Postmodernism compounds this challenge by removing the scope for making any positive, propositional statements about the ideas that religion attempts to address. For Kepnes this means that “postmodern negative theology really signals the end of theology, even as it speaks of the end of philosophy and the long Western tradition of using human reason to form knowledge of the world, of humans, and of God.” This challenge to the viability of theology is something about which both Kepnes and I are in agreement in urgently seeking to address. It indicates how the grounds for sustaining, defending, and transmitting contemporary faith are hardly straightforward. Nonetheless, we part ways in our methodologies on how to address these difficulties. Kepnes accepts the Jewish antecedents of a negative theology but still identifies a path to facilitating the type of leap that could enable propositional religious truth claims to have some sort of positive meaning. I argue that, at least in certain respects, this somewhat misses the point of what a number of contemporary seekers are hoping to find in religious belief.

Jonathan Sacks remarks, “For Judaism, the search for religious certainty through science or metaphysics is not merely fallacious but ultimately pagan. To suppose that God is scientifically provable is to identify God with what is observable, and this for Judaism is idolatry.”<sup>2</sup> While Sacks engages in a sometimes harsh critique of the arguments set out by Louis Jacobs, both scholar-rabbis emphasize the centrality of ritual—the constructive acts performed by individual Jews—as a bedrock of Jewish faith. What both men understand is how ritual could offer a means of creating links to God, to the Jewish people, and indeed to wider society, which establish a context within which to make sense of faith. My central question is whether propositional truth claims are required to underpin this path to faith. My concern is that, in certain circles, there is a tendency for such truth claims to encourage the types of religious authority which serve to limit the model of a simultaneously committed questioning faith that I wish to defend.

In Louis Jacobs’s *A Jewish Theology*, he argues that the task of theology is to draw out the abiding scope of Jewish teachings to be interpreted in ways that can enable them to speak to Jews, even as times change and social, cultural, or intellectual shifts demand revised interpretations of the sources: “The historian uses his skills to demonstrate what Jews have believed. The theologian is embarked on the more difficult, but, if realized, more relevant, task of discovering what it is that a Jew can believe in the present.”<sup>3</sup> Jacobs’s approach here draws from the classic definition of theology articulated by Anselm of Canterbury, who understood the discipline as “faith in search of meaning.”<sup>4</sup> On this reading, theology is an endeavor undertaken by seekers. It is for those striving to make sense of faith. It is not designed to persuade the unbeliever of the rational grounds for faith. In certain respects, this

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 258.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (London: Behrman House, 1973), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Anselm of Canterbury set out his understanding of theology in his *Prosologion*.

reflects Kepnes's goal of trying to construct a positive Jewish theology. He acknowledges how the propositional claims made by religious language are limited, yet he remains intent on identifying a methodology that can still allow this language meaningfully to reference the inexpressible. In this sense, he recognizes the limits of philosophical critique in efforts to maintain faith.

In my research on Jacobs's thought, I argue that the building blocks can be identified for developing a contemporary account of Jewish theology capable of withstanding some of the challenges experienced in trying to defend religious faith today, including those raised about the meaning of religious language.<sup>5</sup> A critical component of this theology is not only that it can underpin the faith of individuals; it also offers a transmissible account of Jewish thought. By creating a chain that links the Jewish past with the future, it offers the possibility for creative individual exploration while ensuring that this theology remains anchored in Jewish teachings. This is how a simultaneously committed yet questioning Judaism can emerge. In order to achieve this goal, Jacobs explains how the individual quest to construct a workable theology of Judaism requires a retained commitment to three central pillars: ritual, textual study, and community.

Jacobs emphasizes the importance of an individual pursuing their own path to a sustainable account of faith, yet this is not built on a sense of self-worship, merely selecting what appeals to the individual. Instead, he insists that it is necessary to understand the interplay which Judaism fosters between the individual and the communal context in which they exist. Drawing from an underlying commitment to the received sources of Jewish teachings, these teachings set out the details for how Jews are to act. Within these sources, Jacobs argues, there is the breadth of ideas to facilitate creative interpretations that enable the ongoing development of shifting theologies. In its turn, this creates the scope for identifying accounts of Jewish teachings that can resonate with contemporary seekers, offering alternatives to realist, positive approaches. This is what can make the task of theology so compelling.<sup>6</sup>

For Jacobs, the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people is built upon the teachings transmitted through the revelation contained in Torah. Here, his theology looks beyond history and community as the frameworks that establish Jewish commitment. Ritual practice—observing the mitzvot of Judaism—offers Jews a mechanism for divine service. No matter the challenges directed at these rituals, and Jacobs acknowledged a variety of these, he argues for the imperative of seeking to identify a means to defend their ongoing

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<sup>5</sup> These ideas are set out in detail in M.J. Freud-Kandel, *Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology* (forthcoming, Liverpool, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> This account helps address Jon Levenson's critique of Jacobs for subordinating halakha to subjective preference (Jon Levenson, review of *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, by Louis Jacobs, *First Things* [November 1999], <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1999/11/beyond-reasonable-doubt>). It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider how certain work in the field of cultural anthropology can potentially contribute to Jacobs's argument. These studies, which examine how an agentic embrace of religious ritual can nurture a yearned for sense of self, help draw attention to the variety of motivations that can impel a sense of divine command. See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Hussein Ali Agrama, "Ethics, Tradition, Authority: Toward an Anthropology of the Fatwa," *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 1 (2010): 2-18; Morgan Clarke, "The Judge as Tragic Hero: Judicial Ethics in Lebanon's Shari'a Courts," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (February 2012): 106-121. See also Orit Avishai, "'Doing Religion' in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency," *Gender and Society* 22, no. 4 (August 2008): 409-433; Mara H. Benjamin, "Agency as Quest and Question: Feminism, Religious Studies, and Modern Jewish Thought," *Jewish Social Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 7-16.

practice, viewing this as a crucial prism for fostering covenantal commitment.<sup>7</sup> By studying the texts that set out these ritual practices, he suggests it is possible to gain a better understanding of the significance of the mitzvot in a life of Jewish faith. The act of studying also offers a methodology for recognizing the flexibility contained within the storehouses of Jewish thought. Such learning consequently offers a methodology for appreciating the scope for creative interpretations of Jewish ritual. It provides access to an understanding of the types of halakhic development that can help individuals identify interpretations of Jewish teachings that can resonate. While practice and study are undertaken by individuals, who thereby seek to nurture some type of personal relationship with God, they also help to build an appreciation of the links between individuals and community. These connections then help to maintain continuity with received teachings. Certain limits are thereby imposed on the creativity that can be accommodated within the sources, yet this is what helps to ensure that the quest for faith retains its anchors within Jewish thought. In this way, ritual, study, and community combine to offer a path to those seekers striving to construct a workable Jewish theology.

In delving further into an examination of the methodologies that empowered Jacobs to construct his simultaneously questioning yet committed account of Jewish theology, it becomes clear that, no matter what challenges he considered, his faith remained broadly unshaken. This reflects the visceral attachments that sustained his faith. The intensity of this bond had been nurtured during his time embedded in the world of the yeshiva.<sup>8</sup> That was where he had been imbued with the sense that ritual observance and Torah study could help to create a framework in which to nurture covenantal commitments to God. Even mitzvot that, in his typology of practices, could fall under the category of the “meaningless” still retained power for him as symbols of divine command.<sup>9</sup> They fed his yearning to experience a sense of commandedness when performing Jewish ritual. A question this raises is whether it is possible to nurture a similar sense of divine command without recourse to the particular experiences that helped Jacobs to develop his theological model. Here, Donald Woods Winnicott’s theories on transitional objects, phenomena, and spaces offer a conceptual framework for identifying an alternative path to developing the type of internalized attachments to a sense of the religious that can empower individuals to construct a model of committed questioning. This provides a distinctive strategy for overcoming the challenges directed at religious truth claims.

Winnicott, a trained pediatrician, applied his studies of childhood development to contribute to the emergence of a new school of psychoanalysis, challenging the previously dominant theories of Sigmund Freud and his followers. James Jones argues that “the work of D. W. Winnicott has been central to the post-Freudian rethinking of the psychoanalysis of religion.”<sup>10</sup> Although his theories were developed while observing infants, they are not limited to this stage in the life of individuals. Rather, they were designed to explain how

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Jacobs, *A Tree of Life: Diversity, Flexibility, and Creativity in Jewish Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> See Jacobs, *Helping with Inquiries* (London: Valentine Mitchell 1989); *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999); Elliot Cosgrove, *Teyku: The Insoluble Contradictions in the Life and Thought of Louis Jacobs* (PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> See Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology*, 226-230. On the arbitrary nature of this typology see, for example, Cosgrove, *Teyku*, 334ff.

<sup>10</sup> James W. Jones, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Religion: Transference and Transcendence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 57.

individuals acquire a secure sense of self and apply this to the inter-relationships they form with others and with the surrounding environment. This is the context in which he argued that transitional objects, phenomena, and spaces can help individuals to navigate between an inner sensed reality and the consciousness of a distinctive external world of experience. He argues that “the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality.” Identifying the importance of developing “an intermediate area of experience,” he suggests that in this third space, “relief from this strain is provided,” since it is neither internal nor external. In this space, he locates a role for “arts, religion, etc.”<sup>11</sup>

William Meissner argues that Winnicott aimed to explain how “the symbolic dimension of human understanding represents an attempt to see beyond the immediate, the material, the merely sensual or perceptual, to a level of deeper meaning and human, if not spiritual, significance.”<sup>12</sup> This points to some of the religious resonances in Winnicott’s thought. Recognizing how an understanding of the external world in which we are situated will always remain limited—reflecting a range of the philosophical challenges noted by Kepnes—Winnicott lays out a strategy that tries to empower individuals to embrace the creative opportunities this could offer. By thereby carving out an intermediate space, which potentially could be occupied by religious ideas, he indicates the limits of either/or models that try to limit life *either* to internal *or* external accounts of reality. In certain respects, albeit from very different perspectives, this could be viewed as Winnicott’s version of Pierce’s “thirdness.”

Winnicott’s research on childhood development highlights the importance of creating a relationship matrix between m/other and infant that initially minimizes the distinctions between internal and external reality. At first, this entails fostering a linked, reassuring sense of co-identity, in which all of the child’s needs are addressed by their carer. The slow nurturing of an “intermediate area of experience” subsequently offers opportunities for the child to develop an independent sense of self, beginning to reduce the need for the m/other to offer reassurance and validation. This process gradually empowers the child to recognize the existence of an external world, beyond internal experience yet related to it, too. Winnicott’s model requires individuals to be nurtured first to see things internally, through apperception. This is what then facilitates the progression to perception: “When I look I am seen, so I exist. I can now afford to look and see. I now look creatively and what I apperceive I also perceive.”<sup>13</sup> In the space between the internal and external, a third area is carved out for the development of resonances and symbols. According to Winnicott, a m/other’s role, initially, is to encourage the illusion of a fused, undifferentiated unity. Gradually, a sense of disillusionment can then be cultivated, enabling the child to recognize their individuality.

One of Winnicott’s contributions in the context of religion is his emphasis on the relational. His studies of the relationship formed between parent and child offer a counterpoise of sorts to Freudian theories. Where Freud argues that human development grows from the internal struggle against instincts—a battle between the ego and the id—for

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<sup>11</sup> D. W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena” in *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 13.

<sup>12</sup> W. M. Meissner, “Religious Thinking as Transitional Conceptualization,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 79, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 181-2.

<sup>13</sup> D. W. Winnicott, “Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development” (1967), in *Playing and Reality*, 134.

Winnicott, human development is a creative and collaborative experience. Freud views cultural interactions as inhibitors of individual fulfillment, imposing rules and limits on what could be done; Winnicott insists that it is human interaction that empowers individuals to gain a sense of self.<sup>14</sup> The utterly dependent infant is reliant on “good enough” parenting to enable them to experience, in place of helplessness, a sense of being held. This is what then facilitates the creativity which moves the child towards the possibility of independence. Indeed, Winnicott understands dependence as a precondition of independence; he argues for the importance of relationships over the satisfaction of instincts. When effectively managed — recognizing the limits of an individual’s independence and appreciating the need to rely on others, instead of teaching helpless dependence—the constructive nature of community can help to foster a sense of independent creativity. Winnicott suggests it is first the parent’s role to teach this to the infant. Subsequently, culture takes on this function, facilitating an appreciation of inter-personal relationships and the role of an intermediate area of experience in steering a path between internal and external perceptions—between a commitment to faith and a willingness and ability to raise questions about that faith while retaining the attachments that can keep an individual secure in their beliefs. Applying this to Judaism, this seems to acknowledge the central importance of ritual practice and religious communities in underpinning the construction of faith. With textual study helping to highlight the variety of interpretations available within Jewish teachings, ritual observance in the context of community can help to cultivate a secure sense of religious identity that has the capacity to facilitate creative exploration.

Although Winnicott’s theories build upon a challenge to Freudian accounts of human development, both thinkers are situated in a psychoanalytic tradition that expresses concerns about religion when it encourages individuals to live in an illusory world that risks fostering an unhealthy escapism. In some ways this can again be connected to the philosophical critiques considered by Kepnes. These philosophical critiques also attack religious teachings as illusions, highlighting how they are incapable of being substantiated either through rational argument or propositional claims. Yet what Winnicott offers, through his defense of an intermediate area of experience, is an understanding of religion that does not seek to set out propositional truths. What he indicates instead is how religion can offer precisely what is sought by many in a post-secular context: a means of trying to make sense of the world that builds from an understanding of the limits in both wholly internal and wholly external accounts.

Winnicott examines how the ability to navigate between inner and outer reality and acquire a realization of independence can be eased through recourse to transitional objects, phenomena, or spaces. In the case of infants, this is often the special toy, blanket, or other object, to which close attachments can develop. During moments when the infant’s needs are not immediately addressed by their carer, as a dawning sense of dependence develops and the existence of an external world beyond the control of the infant begins to come into view, they reassure themselves about the maintained existence of a secure inner sense of reality by cuddling the special object that serves as a transitional phenomenon. This provides comfort on the path towards recognizing the external reality that lies beyond internally created accounts of the world.

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<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly Freud understood that relationships help to form a sense of self, yet he viewed this in more oppositional terms than Winnicott.

By enabling individuals to progress from a sense of secure personal space to recognizing a reality that exists beyond the self, transitional objects offer constancy, security, and reassurance, as a growing consciousness develops of separation and difference from the m/other. They can consequently offer a bridge between differing conceptions of the experienced and sensed world.<sup>15</sup> They also enabled Winnicott to argue for the existence of a third space that looks beyond the simple binaries that seek to emphasize internal or external accounts. By challenging these binaries, he indicates how the task of transitioning between internal reality and external experience, dependence and independence, is not merely a childhood activity. It is a lifelong responsibility. Religion can be located precisely in this space. As he explains, the significance of an intermediate area of experience “throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work.”<sup>16</sup> The implication is that religion, alongside other forms of creative thinking, can be nurtured by navigating between internal and external accounts of the world. When this possibility is closed off, it works to the detriment both of individuals and society more broadly.

To understand how Winnicott’s theories can contribute to constructing a committed yet questioning model of Judaism, we need to consider the importance he places on the role of a carer correctly holding the child in order to nurture a secure sense of identity. As he explains, “The term ‘holding’ is used here to denote not only the actual physical holding of the infant, but also the total environmental provision.”<sup>17</sup> The role played by a surrounding culture in adult life, creating a nurturing environment, reflects the function performed by the carer in the childhood relationship matrix. It also indicates what ritual practice and religious community can potentially offer when they nurture an experience of being held by religion with sufficient assurance. Through the practice of religious rituals performed as divine commands, and in the attachments nurtured within community, it can become easier to navigate to an intermediate area. This offers a space that mediates between internalized accounts of religious teachings and the external challenges that raise questions about the nature of such teachings and any truth claims upon which they are built. Meissner suggests that prayer offers an example of how this plays out. By looking beyond the external practice, it is possible to recognize internalized possibilities for encounter and conceiving something more. The symbolism of a Sefer Torah similarly draws attention to something that exists beyond the text, “evol[ing] from the amalgamation of what is real, material, and objective, as it is experienced, penetrated, and creatively reshaped by the subjective belief and patterns of meaning attributed to the object by the believer.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Adam Phillips, *Winnicott*, (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 118. The growing body of research on the role of material culture in helping to shape Jewish identity can add an additional component to this approach. See, for example, Jodi Eichler-Levine, *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis: How Jews Craft Resilience and Create Community*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> D. W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena—A Study of the First Not-Me Possession,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 34 (1953): 97. Note that religion was just one option for filling this intermediate space; Winnicott recognizes the potential dangers of religious accounts that offered a strategy for escaping reality, as considered further below.

<sup>17</sup> D. W. Winnicott, “The Theory of the Parent–Infant Relationship,” in *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London: Routledge, 1965), 43.

<sup>18</sup> William Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 181. On the role of material culture in helping to shape Jewish identity see, for example, Jodi Eichler-Levine, *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis: How Jews Craft Resilience and Create Community*. Kepnes himself considers the power of prayer in his *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

When using the prism of Winnicott's account of some of the pathways for navigating to faith, in order to assess the model of faith set out by Jacobs, it can become easier to make sense of the types of internalized connections that can underpin theology. This amplifies how reasoned arguments, seeking to delineate propositional claims about religious teachings, can be of limited value when trying to make sense of faith. They run the risk of obscuring how the space for religion is often located in an intermediate area of experience. For Winnicott, the very nature of this space is that it provides relief from internal and external accounts by offering a third space. This need not preclude the types of efforts, like that undertaken by Kepnes, to lay out a model for constructing a positive Jewish theology, identifying a methodology that could allow religious language to make some type of propositional claims about God. However, it does indicate certain limits to this enterprise.

Through Pierce's theory of thirdness Kepnes identifies a strategy for navigating between what he identifies as the two dominant Jewish models of God: the personal versus the absolute. His goal here is to provide a mechanism for trying to say something meaningful about God while recognizing the difficulties of this task. In Winnicott's critique of binary oppositions between internal and external accounts of reality, a potential path could be identified for incorporating a version of Kepnes's argument: to think through how it is that we construct meaning. Yet the premise of thirdness seems to be that it is a strategy. It offers a methodology for trying to say something meaningful about ideas that lie outside of our experience and, indeed, our language. At the same time, it cannot wholly circumvent the challenges that remain in place, which limit what can meaningfully be said about God. What can formally be achieved through this strategy consequently remains unclear, although I recognize what drives the impetus to identify a model that could address these challenges. So, while the appeal of imparting positive meaning to God-talk can be considerable, I am suggesting that Winnicott helps to demonstrate how ritual, study, and community can instead assist in addressing the yearning for sacralization.<sup>19</sup> As such, this indicates the limits of what may be required to sustain a life of faith.

An additional consideration here is the implicit challenge that appears to be directed at the power of metaphor. Winnicott helps to highlight how attachments to Jewish teachings and beliefs are often nurtured more through lived experience and practice rather than reasoned argument. They build from the relational and experiential, teaching how the rituals of Judaism perform a function in terms of the mood that is wrought by their performance. This is the sense in which they can create the type of "holding" experience Winnicott identifies as a prerequisite for cultivating internal and external perceptions of the world. These can then empower individuals to clear a path towards an intermediate area of experience that recognizes the limits to binary accounts of human understanding. Here the poetic biblical depictions of God are embraced for the power of their imagery more than their propositional value. This is a Judaism imbibed in the warmth of a Jewish family, and in the buzz of a Jewish community, where the individual feels securely intertwined.

### **A Path to Contemporary Faith**

In certain respects, Jacobs's struggles to set out the epistemological tools necessary to construct his model of a committed yet questioning Jewish theology reflect the visceral

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<sup>19</sup> This argument calls to mind a position Kepnes previously set out in his "Revelation as Torah: From an Existential to a Postliberal Judaism" in *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 10 (2000): 205-237.

nature of this type of faith. This impaired his ability to unpack the ideas on which his beliefs were built. By drawing out the central role he attributed to ritual, study, and community, it nonetheless becomes possible to identify building blocks from his thought that can potentially help in contemporary efforts to construct a Jewish theology. These can cultivate the type of commitment to Jewish teachings that provide sufficient grounding to create the space for questioning. They also have the potential to offer a path towards an alternative approach to religious authority that, responding to Kepnes's account of the increasing challenges directed at the truth claims associated with religious teachings, neither requires nor expects rational proofs.<sup>20</sup> The type of non-realist commitment fostered by this model of faith undoubtedly lacks the force of metaphysical truths imparting unquestionable divine commands. Yet, by appreciating the role ritual can play in cultivating faith, in the warmth of community, with study of the sources offering a means to appreciate the possibilities for creativity that Judaism contains, firm attachments can still be nurtured.

One of the striking features of the contemporary post-secular religious landscape is the increasing turn away from established institutions in favor of independent, emergent, start-up communities. These groups seek to create alternative types of community, often looking beyond denominational boundary markers. Growing from the bottom up, as grassroots initiatives, they build upon distinctive accounts of religious authority which are often less concerned with establishing religious truths. Their focus instead is directed more towards nurturing opportunities for religious engagement. The internet has been a critical resource in their development, not least by helping them to circumvent many of the costs associated with established religious institutions.<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding Winnicott's account of the importance of community for nurturing the ability to navigate to an intermediate area of experience, the limits imposed by established religion can impede opportunities for appreciating the creativity that is available within Jewish teachings. The growth of emergent communities, of independent minyanim, and of non-, trans-, or post-denominational groups points to a strengthening impetus towards religious creativity.<sup>22</sup> When drawn from a model of committed questioning, these increased opportunities for creativity create a momentum for rethinking notions of religious authority and truth. The abiding task for Jewish theology is to try to think through what that can mean for faith moving forward: retaining its roots in Judaism, linking to the chain of tradition, while embracing new opportunities for appreciating the power of religious language.

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<sup>20</sup> See Freud-Kandel, *Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology*. The benefits of turning to the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein are considered there, drawing on his account of the religious believer as a tightrope walker, reliant on only the merest support to navigate the chasm between faith and doubt.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Ari Kelman, "Looking for Jewish Leadership Online" in *New Jewish Leaders: Reshaping the American Jewish Landscape*, ed. J. Wertheimer (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011) 214-260; Nathan Abrams, "Appropriation and Innovation: Facebook, Grassroots Jews and Offline Post-Denominational Judaism," in *Digital Judaism: Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture*, ed. Heidi Campbell (New York, Routledge: 2015).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Steven M. Cohen, J. Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, and Michelle Shain, *Emergent Jewish Communities and their Participants, Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study* (November 2007) <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/downloadFile.cfm?FileID=2784>; Ethan Tucker "What Independent Minyanim Teach Us About the Next Generation of Jewish Communities," *Zeek* (January 2008), <http://www.zeek.net/801tucker/>.