

Realism, Pluralism, and Salvation: Reading Mordecai Kaplan through John Hick

Vered Sakal

The Minerva Humanities Center, Tel-Aviv University
veredesa@gmail.com

Abstract

The article surveys Kaplan's ideas about God and salvation in the light of current debates on religious realism and pluralism. Using definitions formulated by John Hick, one of the prominent voices of religious realism and pluralism, the article's central argument is that Kaplan was a religious realist who affirmed the ontological existence of God, even though his epistemology dictated the use of a nonrealistic and functionalistic religious language.

Keywords

Mordecai Kaplan – John Hick – religious realism – pluralism – salvation

Preface

“The debate between realist and non-realist understandings of religious language exposes the most fundamental of all issues in the philosophy of religion today.”¹ John Hick, one of the prominent theologians of the twentieth century, draws our attention to a fascinating facet of current religious discourse—the rift between approaches that affirm the existence of a divinity that exists independently of human perception of it, and approaches that negate the ontological existence of a divine entity but nevertheless endow religion with validity and value as a human project.

1 John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

Whether as a projection of human needs, an element in our language, or an externalized human product that attained a degree of distinctiveness and reality as against its producer (as Berger would put it),² religious nonrealism recognizes the importance of the Divine, Ultimate, God, or the Real to human life even though it denies its ontological existence. Consequently, says Hick, while it is actually a type of atheism, religious nonrealism is not an antireligious worldview. Rather it recognizes religious life—beliefs and practices—as a search for meaning and purpose in a nontranscendent universe. Hence, the difference between realist and nonrealist approaches to religion lies not in their use of language or rituals, but in their conceptions of the universe and religion's role in it: While the realist sees religion as a reaction to a transcendent reality, the nonrealist sees religion as a set of beliefs and activities designed to produce a structure of meaning for human life in a naturalistic universe.³

Can Mordecai Kaplan's version of Judaism be understood as religious nonrealism? Kaplan, the founding father of reconstructionist Judaism and one of the leading Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, based his project of the reconstruction of Judaism on the rejection of supernatural cosmology and the idea of a transcendent God. A pragmatist who followed James's and Dewey's empirical and naturalistic orientations, Kaplan was more often concerned with "working hypotheses, not immutable creeds,"⁴ focusing on how believing in God functions, rather than the concept of God and his ontological existence.⁵ Consequently, many of Kaplan's readers and scholars see his

2 Berger describes the transformation of man's ideas into a reality outside of himself as a process of externalization and objectivization: "The humanly produced world becomes something 'out there.'" See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 8–9.

3 "And so we find that the religious non-realist can use the whole range of religious language, and can participate in the established liturgies, recite the creeds and prayers, listen to the scriptures, sing the hymns and receive the sacraments, but all within the invisible brackets of the belief that this activity is an autonomous end in itself, rather than a response to an ultimate transcendent reality." Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 9.

4 Allan Lazaroff, "Kaplan and John Dewey," in *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, ed. E.S. Goldsmith, M. Scult, and R.M. Seltzer (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 173–196.

5 For more on James's and Dewey's pragmatism and their influence on Kaplan, see Richard Libowitz, *Mordechai M. Kaplan and the Development of Reconstructionism* (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1983), 23–40; Daniel S. Breslauer, *Mordecai Kaplan's Thought in a Postmodern Age* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 23.

pragmatic religious project as a nonrealist project that is only “concerned with the effect . . . on the inner life of the people.”⁶

This article will claim that even though Kaplan’s reconstructed Judaism is often portrayed in functionalist terms, when read through Hickian terminology, a unique version of a realistic religiosity can be found in Kaplan’s work that is anchored in a mind-independent God that exists, as Hick puts it, even “if there were no human brains.”⁷ Reading Kaplan informed by Hick’s approaches to divinity, supernaturalism, and religion provides us not only with a new way of looking at Kaplan’s cosmology and theology, but also with an opportunity to examine his work with regard to other religious issues that Hick’s writings arouse, namely the matter of religious pluralism. Utilizing the Hickian epistemological discourse on human inability to know the divine in itself, we will claim that Kaplan’s realistic religion supports a similar epistemological notion that allows for a plurality of religious traditions.

In the following pages we shall explore aspects in Kaplan’s work that could be regarded as supporting religious realism and pluralism, mainly his understanding of the naturalism-supernaturalism dichotomy and his religious language. By doing so, we hope not only to deepen our understanding of Kaplan’s cosmology and epistemology, but also to explore whether the religious worldview they create is relevant to current religious discourse.

Realism, Naturalism, and Salvation

One of the main characteristics of Kaplan’s ambitious enterprise to reconstruct Judaism is his effort to adjust it to what he believed to be modern values: rational scientific thinking, humanism, and naturalism. Throughout his extensive body of work, Kaplan strived to apply new meanings to central Jewish concepts—God, salvation, Israel—by negating their supernaturalistic nature.⁸ Kaplan’s post-supernaturalistic hermeneutics gave rise to adverse reactions:

6 Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, ed. Mel Scult (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press and The Reconstructionist Press, 2001), 62–63.

7 John Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 96.

8 See, for example, David Brusin, “The God of Mordecai Kaplan,” *Judaism* 29, no. 2 (1980): 210. See also Leora Batnizky’s analysis of Kaplan’s hermeneutic project, “Mordecai Kaplan as Hermeneut: History, Memory, and His God-Idea,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 12, no. 2 (2006): 88–98.

while some considered it to be one of the most influential contributions to modern Jewish thought,⁹ others criticized his “ideology of survival,” asking “To what end survival, if that which survives bears little resemblance to what it was?”¹⁰ And indeed, whereas Kaplan’s ideas about Jewish civilization and community were widely accepted in American Jewish life, his cosmology and especially his God-idea were understood by many as what Hick would have called a nonrealistic approach—an atheistic employment of religious terms and habits.

Described by his disciples as “more of a prophet than a philosopher,” Kaplan’s primary interest was not to create a metaphysical analysis of the cosmos.¹¹ But even though Kaplan was less concerned with philosophical inquiries, his work, which spans more than seven decades, provides extensive attention to cosmological theology. Let us explore whether the concept of God that these texts convey is indeed a nonrealistic one.

As we have mentioned above, one of the major themes that Kaplan tried to bequeath to his readers is that the naturalistic—supernaturalistic question should be addressed in a manner that would allow them to sustain what he considered to be modern cosmology. However, Kaplan was careful not to reduce “all manifestations of life . . . to mere operations of matter and physico-chemical causes.”¹² Rejecting naturalistic philosophy, Kaplan’s cosmology attempted to discard supernaturalism while preserving God in a unified “universe within which both man and God exist.”¹³ This effort involved departing

9 See Noam Pianko, “Reconstructing Judaism, Reconstructing America: The Sources and Functions of Mordecai Kaplan’s ‘Civilization,’ ” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 12, no. 2 (2006): 39.

10 “There is no assurance that by rearranging the components of culture, revising its formulas, constructing new *sancta* to replace old, devising new liturgies, worshiping at more contemporary altars, the old culture will survive. The crucial, indeed, the only question is: To what end survival, if that which survives bears little resemblance to what it was. . . . Given our understanding of the nature of survival we cannot but conclude that the ideology of survival on which Mordechai Kaplan has founded the reconstruction of historical Judaism is one which cannot give hope or assurance to the future of Judaism.” Arthur A. Cohen, *The Natural and the Supernatural Jew—An Historical and Theological Introduction* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co., 1967), 205–206.

11 See, for example, Jacob B. Agus, “God in Kaplan’s Philosophy,” *Judaism* 30, no. 1 (1981): 30–35; William E. Kaufman, “Kaplan’s Approach to Metaphysics,” in *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, ed. E.S. Goldsmith, M. Scult, and R.M. Seltzer (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 271–282.

12 Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1957), 95.

13 Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1957), 316.

“from the traditional idea of God as a self-existent entity”¹⁴ and using the concept of transnaturalism, which Kaplan describes as an “extension of naturalism which takes into account much that mechanistic or materialistic or positivist science is incapable of dealing with.”¹⁵

Placing his God in a transnaturalist universe that has no supernatural dimensions or self-existent entities required Kaplan to reconstruct his God-idea in new terms:

There is a type of naturalism which recognizes qualitative distinctions between lower and higher orders of being. . . . Truth, justice, love are conceived as operating in their own right and helping to bring order out of chaos. Hence there is no reason for dismissing the experience of selfhood or personality as illusion. By the same token, we must accept as genuine the experience of Godhood, which is to the environment or cosmos what selfhood or personality is to the body.¹⁶

Kaplan’s transnaturalist God is a being of a “higher order,” i.e., transcendent with respect to the world of mere physical-chemical phenomenon. An “immanent to the universe higher being,” Kaplan’s God transcends human life. He is a power or process in the cosmos that redeems human life from its merely temporary character by giving humans direction and making for human salvation.¹⁷ Much has been written about Kaplan’s God, and Kaplan was well aware of how his “God as a process” concept was received by many of his critics, who described his work as what Hick would call “non-realistic.” Kaplan addressed this matter directly in many of his writings. In *Questions Jews Ask* he writes:

The conception of God as cosmic Process has been subjected to considerable misunderstanding. . . . Many an ill-informed critic has even charged that conception with being atheistic. What are life, knowledge, goodness

14 Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1962), 32–33.

15 Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism without Supernaturalism: The Only Alternative to Orthodoxy and Secularism* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1958), 10. For more about Kaplan’s supernaturalism, see Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Beyond Supernaturalism: Mordecai Kaplan and the Turn to Religious Naturalism,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 12, no. 2 (2006): 80–86.

16 Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 95.

17 Kaplan, *Judaism without Supernaturalism*, 112.

if not processes? They are certainly not beings or entities. Since God is life, knowledge, goodness, what else can He be but Process?¹⁸

Kaplan attempts to refute atheistic accusations by demonstrating what kind of existence God has in his transnaturalist universe. He states God's reality, over and over again, by demonstrating the reality of nonsensual objects.¹⁹ But does such a God-idea, as a "Reality rather than a Being,"²⁰ unequivocally support a realistic concept of God that exists independently of human perception, or is it actually an externalized human product that attained a degree of distinctiveness and reality as against its producer? It seems that Kaplan needed to produce a firmer statement about the ontological existence of God in order to prevent an atheistic reading of his work. In an article published in *The Reconstructionist* in 1964, Kaplan is willing to go a bit further with the ontological argument by saying that "God, ontologically, is therefore that aspect of the cosmos which functions as a unified field of relationships."²¹

Kaplan's choice of words can be understood as an attempt to reject idealist and atheistic understandings of his work. As against humanistic interpretations of God as a physiological-social projection or an emotional symbol, Kaplan not only affirms the existence of his God "independently of relation to man" as an "ontological polarity" but also directly rejects a Deweyan reading of his God-idea:

In any event, this discussion should once and for all forestall finding even incidental resemblance between the sense in which the term "God" is used in this discussion and that in which John Dewey uses it in advocating the retention of the term. To John Dewey the term "God" is merely an emotional symbol for the object of human idealism. The use of the term "God" is intended to suggest both a correlative meaning and a substantive meaning. The correlative meaning is the one it has from the standpoint of what it affirms concerning salvation. The substantive meaning is the

18 Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 102.

19 "It is important to recognize that the belief in God is entirely compatible with naturalism, in which qualities, relations and values are accorded at least as much reality as the objects of the senses." Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 98.

20 Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit*, 169.

21 Mordecai M. Kaplan, "When is a Religion Authentic?," *The Reconstructionist* 30, no. 11 (1964): 14.

one it has from the standpoint of what it affirms concerning the cosmos independently of its relations to man.²²

Kaplan's direct ontological statement suggests the significance he ascribed to a realistic reading of his theoretical and practical work. His persistence in refuting atheistic interpretations leads us to conclude that even though Kaplan offered his readers a bold concept of a functionalistic Godhood, it was extremely important to him to present his work as a realistic project. Let us now examine whether Kaplan's worldview and his notion of God fit in with Hick's account of religious realism:

Each of the great religious traditions affirms that in addition to the social and natural world of our ordinary human experience there is a limitlessly greater and higher Reality beyond or within us, in relation to which or to whom is our highest good . . . and to give oneself freely and totally to this One is our final salvation/liberation/enlightenment/fulfillment.²³

The Kaplanian God is indeed a nonhuman higher reality in relation to which human salvation is achieved. Hence we can say that thus far Kaplan's religious project parallels Hickian definitions of religious realism, and that Kaplan can be considered as a religious realist. But, even though Kaplanian cosmology does create a religious system that contains an ontologically existing God that has a transformative value, it seems that this religious system differs from

22 Ibid., 16–17. One of the origins of Kaplan's correlative notion of God is his reading of Hermann Cohen's work, especially his *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (first published in 1919). In *The Purpose and Meaning of Jewish Existence*, in which Kaplan posits his conceptions of Judaism in direct comparison with other Jewish thinkers, Kaplan defines Cohen's correlative concept as a "seminal idea." See Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Purpose and Meaning of Jewish Existence: A People in the Image of God* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971), 58. In his article "Hermann Cohen and Mordechai M. Kaplan," Kohanski criticizes Kaplan's reading of Cohen. Addressing the way Kaplan presents Cohen's notion that "God is the correlate of man" and that "Divinity is to be conceived as that aspect of nature which impels and helps man to transcend his animal nature," Kohanski claims that "both the phrasing of the meaning of correlation and its expansion into 'other words' are, to be sure, Kaplan's views, but not Cohen's." Alexander S. Kohanski, "Hermann Cohen and Mordechai M. Kaplan," *Jewish Social Studies* 29, no. 3 (1967): 156. For more on Cohen's idea of correlation and Kaplan's understanding (or misunderstanding) of it, see *ibid.*, 162.

23 John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 39.

Hick's definition of realistic religion in one important aspect—it is not supernaturalistic, a matter Hick values as crucial:

It is only if this universe is the creation or expression of an ultimate overarching benign reality, and is such that the spiritual project of our existence continues in some form beyond this present life, that it is possible to expect a fulfillment that can justify the immense pain and travail of the journey. . . . The non-realist faith starts from and returns to the naturalistic conception that we are simply complex animals who live and die. . . . Thus, the non-realistic forms of religion . . . abandon hope for humankind as a whole.²⁴

Hick connects the realistic and nonrealistic issue with the naturalistic and supernaturalistic debate, describing them as a mutual either/or choice without intermediate possibilities.²⁵ The distinction, says Hick, is crucial. For only when we accept a transcendent understanding of the universe can we allow the existence of realities that are able to transform human life and lead humans to salvation. Most men and women, says Hick, cannot reach salvation/liberation/enlightenment/fulfillment in the duration of one human life. Hence, except for a few outstanding individuals, most of us require a prolongation that could only be achieved in a supernatural universe that allows for the “continuation of human spiritual growth beyond the point reached at the time of bodily death.”²⁶

The complexities and ramifications of Hick's theory of life after death are too vast to be covered in this article. Thus, we shall refrain from going into the depths of his debate on the matter and the extensive secondary literature it generated. Rather, we will extract from it an important aspect of his religious thinking that is relevant to our reading of Kaplan: According to Hick, a non-supernaturalistic religion cannot offer a “realistic religion,” i.e., a real possibility of salvation/transformation/fulfillment. As such it is necessarily

24 Ibid., 12–13.

25 “Let me ask in conclusion, however, whether we are really faced with an either/or choice between religious realism and non-realism? May there not also be intermediate possibilities? I think not. There can be endlessly different and endlessly complex and subtle variations on either theme, no doubt with all manner of new options yet to be developed. But in the end they will all fall on one or the other side of the distinction between naturalistic and supra-naturalistic understandings of the universe.” Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 15.

26 Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 101–102.

a pessimistic worldview, for it condemns the majority of the human race to remain forever unfulfilled.²⁷

Examining Kaplan's cosmology and salvational theology we come to realize that his religious project is not congruent with Hick's theory of realism, supernaturalism, and salvation. In accordance with his transnatural cosmology that places everything in the same universe, Kaplan's salvation cannot include supernatural elements, such as life after death.²⁸ But, as Kaplan is very prudent to note, his negation of supernaturalism does not mean the annulment of the existence of a realistic, transformative God. Hence, Kaplan's realistic religion, contrary to Hick's, requires the Jews to live and redeem their lives in an in-this-world personal and social salvation, by achieving an integrated personality on the one hand, and a social order that will allow each individual the "maximum opportunity for creative self-expression on the other."²⁹

Kaplan is well aware of the fact that the attainment of such salvation is "not of today or of tomorrow."³⁰ Still, he asserts, men should not feel overwhelmed and impotent in light of their mortality and the short time they have on this earth to achieve their personal and social goals. That is because God, the power that makes for salvation that is inherent in this world, counteracts this notion of futility and promises the ability to achieve a salvation that is not a static state of "physical compensation for human suffering"³¹ but a human aspiration toward maximum fulfillment.³²

The difference between the two thinkers is, therefore, clear: Whereas Hick connects salvation and supernaturalism, Kaplan disconnects the two; and while Hick asserts that in most cases human salvation can occur only in the afterlife, Kaplan assumes that human fulfillment is an in-one-lifetime and in-this-world possible-to-achieve project. But even though the two thinkers differ greatly in their perceptions of salvation, they both present themselves as realistic and optimistic, emphasizing the ability of their religious systems of

27 Ibid., 99–101.

28 "Belief in the survival of the individual after death is one which it is questionable that a mature religion can support. . . . Instead, we must learn to feel that our life is worthwhile so long as it is allied with the eternal life of God, that is to say, the Power that makes for human salvation." Kaplan, *Judaism without Supernaturalism*, 114–115.

29 Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 53–54.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 For more on Kaplan's ideas on salvation, see Harold M. Schulweis, "A Critical Assessment of Kaplan's Ideas of Salvation," in *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, ed. E.S. Goldsmith, M. Scult, and R.M. Seltzer (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 257–270.

God-man-world to ensure the possibility of salvation.³³ Therefore, we can say that Hick and Kaplan create parallel religious schemes that consist of the same religious elements—God-man-world-optimism-salvation—but endow some of them with different meanings: Kaplan talks about God as ontologically existing, but, as opposed to Hick, does not recognize him as a transcendent entity; and while we can say that the Hickian religious experience occurs in three “worlds”—this world, the world-to-come, and the supernatural world—Kaplan’s religion occurs only in one: this world.

We thus come to realize that reading Kaplan while utilizing Hickian terminology allows us not only to deepen our understanding of Kaplan’s work, but to critically analyze Hick’s work as well. Let us now employ the same method on the issues of epistemology and pluralism.

The Linguistic-Epistemological Issue and Pluralism

We have seen that Kaplan’s transnaturalist cosmology describes a universe in which a nonsupernatural higher reality exists independently of human conception of it. The question is, then, if Kaplanian cosmology supports the notion of a realistic God, why are there so few direct ontological discussions in his work? For even though Kaplan incorporates into the Reconstructionist prayer book a meditation called “God the Life of Nature,” in which he uses a bold pantheistic portrayal of God as the “unity Of all that is,”³⁴ or writes in his personal journal about his belief in “God as a transcendent Being,”³⁵ he

33 For more on Kaplan’s optimism and his approach to evil, see Steven T. Katz, “Mordecai Kaplan’s Theology and the Problem of Evil,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 12, no. 2 (2006): 115–126. See also Eliezer Berkovits, *Major Themes in Modern Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Ktav, 1974), 160–163.

34 Kaplan also describes God in this meditation as “oneness That spans the fathomless deeps of space” and “the creative flame That transfigures lifeless substance.” Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 84–85. On Kaplan’s approach to liturgy, Eric Caplan writes, “Liturgical creativity has been a hallmark of Reconstructionism since its inception, and the movement has been continually responsive to changing American religious and cultural sensitivities.” Eric Caplan, *From Ideology to Liturgy: Reconstructionist Worship and American Liberal Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union Press, 2002), 5. For more on Kaplan’s prayer books, see *ibid.*, 50–124.

35 Describing a conversation with Dr. Samuel Schulman, Kaplan affirms his belief in “God as a transcendent Being.” See Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit*, 169.

refrains, by and large, from explicit ontological statements about God in most of his discussions of him.³⁶

One possible explanation for Kaplan's tendency to refrain from ontological language has already been mentioned—Kaplan's main interest was not metaphysics or theology. He was a pragmatist who strived to save the Jews and Judaism.³⁷ Hence, he was trying to create theoretical tools for the modern Jew who is looking for a way to find God, not to compose a new philosophy. The relevant religious language for such a task is not a metaphysical language, but a humanistic and functionalistic language that discusses God's presence and relevance to human life rather than his reality and essence.³⁸

Another way of explaining Kaplan's mostly nonmetaphysical discussion about God's reality lies in the Kaplanian epistemology and the discourse it allows:

We cannot expect to understand the nature of God. Who of us even knows the nature of man, or for that matter his own nature? . . . But we must be able to state definitely what experiences or phenomena we are prepared to identify as manifestations of God, and why we identify them as such.³⁹

Kaplan's religious language is often nonontological not only because of his motive for writing, i.e., his project to save Judaism and the Jews, but also because

36 We shall not attempt to interpret the peculiar characteristics of and the differences between the varied Kaplanian writing genres, and to decide whether Kaplan uses different terms deliberately, speaking with a "forked theological tongue" to different audiences. For our purpose it will suffice to call attention to the fact that the majority of Kaplan's references to God are nonontological.

37 Jacob J. Staub, "Kaplan and Process Theology," in *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, ed. E.S. Goldsmith, M. Scult, and R.M. Seltzer (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 283–293. Note also Kaplan's remark that "as far as Jewish religion, with its teachings and rituals, is concerned, it matters very little how we conceive God, as long as we so believe in God that belief in Him makes a tremendous difference in our lives." *Questions Jews Ask*, 87.

38 This notion is stressed in numerous Kaplanian texts. See, for example, his discussion on the main function of religion in Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Basic Values in Jewish Religion* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1957), 85–87. Breslauer presents the pragmatic-linguistic project from a postmodern perspective, claiming Kaplan was a "skeptic of language" whose "ultimate interest lies in textuality and its meaning rather than in things and their structure." Breslauer, *Mordecai Kaplan's Thought*, 30.

39 Kaplan, *The Meaning of God*, 20.

that is the only way Kaplan thinks we can speak about God, for we cannot grasp his essence “apart from what the human mind identifies as evidences of His functioning in physical or human nature.”⁴⁰ Hence, the Kaplanian language is mostly nonontological because it reflects Kaplan’s religious epistemology: we might not be able to know God’s nature, but we can recognize the effects of divine activity as it is revealed in nature and in human life. Such religious epistemology resonates, of course, with the Maimonidean attributes of action theory, a connection Kaplan himself affirms in “When is a Religion Authentic?” when he discusses Maimonides’s account of Exodus 33, where God refuses to let Moses see the divine face but allows him to see his back:

By the same token we discern the existence of God in the functioning of moral responsibility and in His attribute as the Power that makes for man’s salvation. But the ultimate connection between ontological polarity and man’s salvation must forever remain a mystery.⁴¹

Accepting human inability to directly perceive God—ontological polarity—as a postulate of Kaplan’s religious epistemology, we come to understand that when he speaks of universal forces that make for human improvement he is not avoiding a direct ontological reference to God because he thinks God does not realistically exist. On the contrary, he is speaking about God the best way his epistemology allows him to—by recognizing God’s correlative meaning that concerns man’s salvation.⁴² Hence we can say that Kaplan’s linguistics reflects his religious epistemology: while he rarely discusses the ontological aspects of God and often chooses a functionalist-humanistic-correlative language, he does offer his readers a theistic epistemology in which God exists and is very much present in the world and their lives.

Such a religious epistemology, which refutes the ability to know God’s substantive meaning and focuses on his attributes and his manifestations in nature and human life, calls to mind Hick’s Kantian religious epistemology, which distinguishes between the divine Reality as it exists in itself and as it is humanly experienced.⁴³ This epistemology acknowledges not only the gap

40 Kaplan, “When Is a Religion Authentic?,” 16.

41 Ibid. See also Kaufman, “Kaplan’s Approach to Metaphysics,” 276.

42 Kaplan, “When Is a Religion Authentic?,” 17. For more on the changing meanings of God, see David Brusin, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Mordecai M. Kaplan,” *The Reconstructionist* 50, no. 6 (1985): 11–15, 35.

43 Paul R. Eddy, “Religious Pluralism and the Divine: Another Look at John Hick’s Neo-Kantian Proposal,” *Religious Studies* 30, no. 4 (1994): 469.

between the divine reality and the way it is sensed and understood by men, but also the various representations of the unattainable divine reality that these human sensations and understandings produce:

We see the Real always and only through the spectacles of our religious categories; and these, as we are actually aware today, vary significantly from one culture to another.⁴⁴

Each culture, says Hick, responds differently to the ultimate reality that is beyond conceptualization. It projects its own concepts on the indescribable divinity, creating a system of belief that is unique and coherent within itself. Various religions can be seen as differing apprehensions of the one divinity which cannot be known in itself but only in and through human encounters with it. As such these religions cannot be graded as more or less truthful, for the divine reality cannot be known in itself. Rather, they are accounted as true in so far as they are “soteriologically effective,” that is, if they make “possible the transformation of human existence.”⁴⁵

A detailed analysis of the pluralistic approach that stems from Hick’s religious epistemology is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, in light of the concise summary of his main arguments, we can ask: Does Kaplan’s religious epistemology support a similar notion of pluralism? Does his work indicate an understanding of every religion as “intrinsically and unconditionally valuable”?⁴⁶ It seems that the answer would be positive:

The assumption that one’s religion is the only *true* religion is as obsolete as that one’s country is the center of the world. Every religion aspires to be a means of salvation to the members of its people or church. No religion can be absolutely more *true* or less *true* than another.⁴⁷

Although Kaplan does not develop a theoretical system of religious pluralism, we can see that his religious epistemology lays the ground for a pluralistic worldview that recognizes the inherent value of every religion as a

44 Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 7.

45 Eddy, “Religious Pluralism,” 39.

46 For a detailed discussion on religious pluralism, including Hick’s version, see Avi Sagi, “Religious Pluralism Assessed,” *Sophia* 38, no. 2 (1999): 93–115.

47 Kaplan, *Judaism without Supernaturalism*, 75. I have preserved the original italics.

manifestation of God's presence in the world.⁴⁸ That is because each religion-culture-civilization manifests a particular understanding of the cosmos and of the universal human longing and need for salvation.⁴⁹ As a result, each religion can be considered as true, for religious truth is not concerned with ontological or metaphysical claims about the existence and nature of God, but with man's ability to achieve salvation.

We concluded our analysis of Kaplan's and Hick's religious cosmology by pointing out the differences between their approaches to naturalism and salvation. It seems that on matters of epistemology and pluralism the two thinkers have more in common. For even though Kaplan did not systematically develop an explicit explanation of his pluralistic notion, when fully accounted for, his work does sustain a religious pluralism that stems from an epistemological standpoint that emphasizes the manifestations of Godhood in the human world rather than its ontological essence.

Conclusion

Summarizing what our reading of Kaplan through "Hickian eyes" has taught us, we can say that our investigation of Kaplan's cosmology and epistemology presented us with strong evidence for his religious realism and deepened our understanding of the implications of his naturalistic religiosity. We found that Kaplan can be portrayed as a naturalist religious realist who assumes that even though God ontologically exists, he cannot be known directly, but only through his attributes as they are manifested in the universal and human nature. This Maimonidean epistemology leads to the preference of a religious language that focuses on God's salvational actions in human life, as well as to religious pluralism. For if no man is capable of knowing the mystery of God's essence, no religion can claim to be the only true religion—each religion is true as long as it aspires to be the means of salvation for its members.

Identifying the basic structure of Kaplan's and Hick's religious worldview and the specific variations of each thinker's religious system allows us not only to better understand Kaplan's basic assumptions, but also to compare the basic assumptions of each thinker about the God-man-world-optimism-salvation system: both thinkers value salvation as the focal point of religion,

48 For more on Kaplan's pluralism, see Sandra B. Lubarsky, *Tolerance and Transformation: Jewish Approaches to Religious Pluralism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1990), 101–118.

49 Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 330–331.

and seek ways of making it possible. Their shared epistemological notion of the unattainable essence of God creates an additional affinity between their religious systems—their pluralistic approach to religious diversity. Nevertheless, the resemblance also emphasizes the unique features of each thinker's religious worldview and beliefs: While Hick holds that only a supernaturalistic cosmology validates a realistic religious project of salvation, Kaplan offers a naturalistic salvational religious realism that challenges Hick's dichotomous either/or choice between naturalistic atheism and supernaturalistic realism.

Let us conclude our attempt to read Kaplan through John Hick's work by portraying the Kaplanian project via Hickian terminology: it is a realistic, naturalistic, pluralistic, and optimistic salvational religious system that prefers a nonontological religious language not because Kaplan is a self-sufficient humanist-atheist, but because it is the religious language that can best describe the Kaplanian God. Thus, Kaplan's religion is not a nonrealist linguistic project in which "God" has meaning but no existence. Rather, it is a religious system that points to the divine reality that everybody can recognize and utilize, for everybody, according to Kaplan, can know God by his actions in nature and in them.⁵⁰

Through this presentation we come to see how Kaplan's theological, epistemological, and linguistic efforts can relate to current religious debates that explore the tension between transcendent and nontranscendent religious worldviews and seek justification of interreligious pluralism. For, even though Kaplan's work does not offer an organized theoretical account of these matters, it does contain the necessary elements to support the possibility of religious realism and pluralism.

50 Greeve Davaney calls this move a democratization of religion. See Greeve Davaney, "Beyond Supernaturalism," 78.