



Radicalism, Religion, Jewishness: The Case of Emma Goldman

Author(s): David Waldstreicher

Source: *American Jewish History*, Autumn 1990, Vol. 80, No. 1 (Autumn 1990), pp. 74-92

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23884473>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Jewish History*

Radicalism, Religion, Jewishness: The Case of Emma Goldman

David Waldstreicher

Radical—and Jew? Of course, write Irving Howe and other Old Left commentators on the ups and downs of Socialism in twentieth-century America. Of course, repeats a mature New Left confident that since ethnicity has become a matter of pride, we can carve out redemptive identities as *Jewish* radicals. After all, there is a *tradition*: anyone can point to his or her own favorite American Jewish activist and make a plausible case for the salience of that figure's Jewishness.

Yet, in elevating Jewish radicalism to the realm of the natural, we find ourselves in close quarters with the enemy. The foremost anti-Semites of our era have insisted on an all-too-similar reduction: Judaism as Bolshevism. And American Jewish radicals have been quite aware of this tendency. From the feminists whose Jewishness went unacknowledged because their numbers were all too apparent to their gentile peers to the communist organizers who changed their names in order to reach the "American" worker, twentieth-century Jewish radicals have cut perilous middle paths between complete denial and the not-yet-useful fiction of radicalism *as* Jewishness.¹

I use the term "fiction" with the utmost respect for such inventions. Our subject is ideology, and Jewish radicalism's need to be placed in that category of pragmatic reinventions of the past: the messy politics of group formation and personal identity. Yet the effort to invent an authentic Jewish New Leftism seems to require the screening out of the relative nature of all ideological positioning. We are formed by that which we say we are not, in acts

ABBREVIATIONS

RES Alix Kates Shulman, ed., *Red Emma Speaks: Selected Writings and Speeches of Emma Goldman* (New York: 1983)

LML Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* (1931, repr. New York: 1970)

ME *Mother Earth*

- 1 See Elinor Lerner, "American Feminism and the Jewish Question, 1890-1940" and Arthur Liebman, "Anti-semitism on the Left?" in David Gerber, ed., *Anti-Semitism in American History* (Urbana: 1986), pp. 305-359, and more generally, Liebman, *Jews and the Left* (New York: 1978).

The Case of Emma Goldman

of opposition, but we must ignore the complications of context in order to act. What we forget in such practice is the very real diversity of American Jewry, the similar variety of radicalisms, and the kinds of Judaism and radicalism that the American context spawned. The question of how Jewish are Jewish radicals has been argued with eloquence from a number of perspectives, and will no doubt be addressed from many more. It may be no accident, though, that the question itself leads us away from other, perhaps more difficult problems: how radical, how religious, and how American?

We can better appreciate this silence by considering the two (broadly defined) types of treatment that American Jewish radicals have received (largely from Jews, one might add) during the past 20 years. The first and most persistent school of thought, which I think of as radicalism-as-mere-religion, tends to cast radicals as irrational and maladjusted worshippers of the God that failed. Radicals turn out to have been unable to see certain basic facts of American "reality" that were plain to the majority of economically advancing and ethnically identifying "real" Americans. This position is often adopted by formerly leftist scholars such as Daniel Bell and Aileen Kraditor, who herald the end of ideology and celebrate the supposed triumph of rational or scientific politics.² At its best this thesis points to unbridgeable gaps between movement ideologies and popular culture. At its worst it claims that popular ideology was therefore rational and fundamentally right(ist).

The other, far more sympathetic view might be called the qualified marginal man theory of Jewish radicalism. It is brought out most explicitly in Gerald Sorin's *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920* (1985). Here the factors of exile and urbanization that underlay the marginal man theory, for which the emancipated Jewish intellectual has long been the exemplar,³ is coupled with the "commandments of Torah and Talmud . . . messianic belief-systems, traditions of *tzedaka* (not mere charity, but righteousness and justice towards others, mutual aid, and communal responsibility)." Such interpretations

2 Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton: 1967); Aileen Kraditor, *The Radical Persuasion, 1890-1917* (Baton Rouge: 1982); S. Rothman and R. Lichter, *The Roots of Radicalism: Jews, Christians, and the New Left* (New York: 1983).

3 Robert Park, "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," *American Journal of Sociology* 33 (1928), 881-893; Milton Gordon, "Marginality and the Jewish Intellectual," *Human Nature, Class and Ethnicity* (New York: 1978), pp. 279-295. For an interesting application, see Murray Baumgarten, *City Scriptures: Modern Jewish Writing* (Cambridge, MA: 1982).

American Jewish History

do posit a “rich mixture” of social change and “cultural persistence” but tend to flounder when it comes to describing that potent brew.⁴ Perhaps this is just the most academic version of the generally accepted view put forth by Irving Howe in *World of Our Fathers* (1976): that of a Jewish *volksgeist*

embodied in the code of *menschlichkeit*, a readiness to live for ideals beyond the claims of self, a sense of plebian fraternity, an ability to forge a community of moral order even while remaining subject to a society of social disorder, and a persuasion that human existence is a deeply serious matter for which all of us are finally accountable.⁵

For Howe, Jewish radicalism is best seen as the secular sublimation of all that is redemptive in the Jewish tradition. What could easily be read as a rabbi’s polemical juxtaposition of Judaism and Christianity is recast as culture, Yiddish versus *goyish*. Though I for one am grateful for such a detailed and beautifully written treatment of New York Jewish radicalism, the “fervor,” the “blazing secular passion appearing first as Socialism, then as Zionism, or the two together” is harnessed by Howe in a sort of radical Jewish winners’ history. By this I mean that those radicals who (like Howe) successfully and intelligently fused Socialism, Judaism, and Zionism are presented as the fulfillment of our fathers and the epitome of Yiddishkeit: those who (unlike Howe) had difficulty reconciling Judaism and radicalism are pushed to the margins, so that they might be quiet.

But in real life they weren’t quiet, as Howe’s own chapters on ghetto politics demonstrate. Changes in religious belief and practice receive short shrift: a generation of historians will slave valiantly at the cleanup work. But what of those left out of the Left? Ironically, Howe excommunicates anarchists and communists for the same sin that more pious Jews find in him: hostility to Judaism as a system of sacred observance. Howe’s attempt to distill the Jewish spirit works against his own recognition of the Jewish rejection of “monolithic community.” The ambivalence that results is apparent in his portrait of Joseph Barondess, the communal leader who in “gaudy excess” tried to be all things to all people.

-
- 4 Gerald Sorin, *American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: 1985), p. 3. Sorin himself seems to be moving away from a persistence theory towards one of creative accommodation; see Sorin, “Tradition and Change: American Jewish Socialists as Agents of Accommodation,” *American Jewish History* 79 (1989), 37-54.
- 5 Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: 1976), p. 645.

The Case of Emma Goldman

The man who actually synthesized radicalism and tradition, who could lead strikes with the “Ten Commandments of Labor,” is destined in the end to be “wide but shallow.”⁶

Of course syncretic appeals to large numbers are “shallow”; of course the masses “brushed aside” the dogmas of anarchism and socialism. But aren’t we sacrificing a more nuanced and historical appreciation of ideological change? How did immigrant Jews—some radicalized before arrival, some after, and most not at all—negotiate such worldviews with American industrial capitalism, American party politics, and American-style religious pluralism? What about the worlds—Jewish and American—beyond the Lower East Side? And what of the most famous Jewish radical of her time: the atheist who was often seen as the most radical, and often, as the most religious?

Howe is just one of many commentators to note the religiosity with which Jewish anarchists damned the Jewish religion. The vehemence of their atheism and the violence of their internecine squabbles might earn them a place as some of Laurence Moore’s American religious outsiders, forming their purified identity by excoriating the blind majority.⁷ As Moore’s book suggests, there are other ways to consider evidence such as the 1890 program for a “Grand Yom Kippur Ball. With theatre. Arranged with the consent of all the new rabbis of Liberty.”⁸ What Howe labels “tomfoolery” can be seen as creative opposition or engagement. According to Bruce Nelson, anarchists in late nineteenth-century Chicago invented their own working-class subculture replete with picnics, singing societies, theater groups, dances, their own newspapers, and parades on such occasions as the anniversary of the Paris Commune.⁹ In *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France*, Richard Sonn investigates the cabaret culture of Montmartre and the anarchists’ oral, literary, and visual-art productions as a cultural movement with its own particular content-laden forms.¹⁰ These revolutionary countercultures can be seen as groups of dissenters who engaged in losing battles with the

6 Howe, pp. 290-1, 104-108, 122-123, 112-115.

7 R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: 1986).

8 Howe, p. 106; Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York’s Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, MA: 1966), p. 155; Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton: 1988), p. 181.

9 Bruce Nelson, *Beyond the Martyrs: A Social History of Chicago’s Anarchists, 1870-1900* (New Brunswick: 1988), pp. 112-150.

10 Richard Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Lincoln: 1989).

American Jewish History

dominant faiths of politics *and* religion—battles they lost because they were most irreconcilably opposed to the existing order, and because they were suppressed with the greatest force.

To put it another way, the anarchists may be considered “religious” because they were the most persistent revolutionists of their day. As David Brion Davis has observed, “only a few historians have recognized the religious connotations contained in the very idea of revolution.” American anarchists did try “to overturn a reigning theodicy and thereby redefine the sources of evil and the historical limits of human perfection”—and in the effort found themselves cast as precisely that source of “special horror,” the antithesis of all things American.¹¹ Yet there is another reason, equally important, why I find the radicalism-as-religion equation worth exploring (despite its pitfalls) for the pre-World War I anarchists like Emma Goldman: the remarkably spiritualized content of their creed. Of all the romantic radicalisms that flowered in the age of industrialization it may be that none were so confident of the value of the individual’s quest for self-realization as libertarian anticapitalist anarchism and its successor, anarcho-syndicalism.¹² Opposing organized religion and the state, Goldman supported voluntary organizations only insofar as they promoted the “free growth and development of the innate forces and tendencies” of persons.¹³ She was the arch-romantic, championing the individual as “cosmos in himself.” Rejecting materialist and Marxian stage-development theories of history as “cold and mechanistic,” Goldman nonetheless faulted capitalism and its agents of power—government, church, and all other “fetishes of [man’s] own creation.” She placed her “beautiful ideal” against the false gods of religion and nation. Only by tracing the changing character of her radical and spiritualized opposition can we appreciate the depth and the limits of her mission in a Christian, patriotic America. Even her eulogies were spoken in American, Christian terms. Years after her deportation, Lincoln Steffens could still recall her as “a Methodist sent to a Presbyterian heaven, and of course she thought it was hell.”¹⁴

11 David Brion Davis, “American Equality and Foreign Revolutions,” *Journal of American History* (Dec. 1989), 741; Robert H. Wiebe, *The Segmented Society* (New York: 1975), p. 148; Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1920* (New York: 1987), p. 330.

12 Robert Sayre and Michael Lowy, “Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism,” *New German Critique* 34 (1984), 78-85; Margaret Marsh, *Anarchist Women, 1870-1920* (Philadelphia: 1982), pp. 101-102.

13 Emma Goldman, “The Child and Society,” *RES*, p. 139.

14 Cited in Herbert Leibowitz, *Fabricating Lives: Explorations in American Autobiography* (New York: 1989), p. 194.

The Case of Emma Goldman

Goldman structured her lengthy autobiography as a narrative of conversion and commitment to a “beautiful ideal.” Two major crises confirm her radical identity and serve as inspiration in later trials. The first occurred during her early adolescence, when she escaped her father’s violence and her mother’s coolness through a vicarious involvement in the *narodnaya volya* or People’s Will—the early Russian socialist movement. These so-called nihilists faced severe repression after committing a series of terrorist acts, including the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881. This essentially middle-class intellectual movement shaped Goldman in crucial ways. First, novels such as Chernyshevsky’s *What Is to Be Done?* (1869) presented the possibility of individual freedom and group fellowship in a revolutionary movement for the benefit of the trampled masses. It was a compelling vision: Russian Jews who, like Goldman, were radicalized during the 1880’s tended to remain universalistic in orientation, even long after coming to America.¹⁵ And perhaps more importantly, the Russian nihilists included (in fact and in fiction) a number of prominent revolutionary women who triumphed over gender conventions and carved out identities outside marriage in their work for the cause. For Goldman, the anti-statist revolution and the revolt against patriarchy were joined at conception. The stakes are simply higher: when Goldman speaks of the state or the powers that be she has in mind the sources of all kinds of domination. In *Living My Life*, young Emma’s secret sympathy with the revolutionists coincides with her arrival in St. Petersburg and leads up to the first resolution in the *bildungsroman*—the flight from her father, with a beloved sister, to the home of an elder sister in America.¹⁶

Goldman’s second crisis is also a rebellion against family and young women’s roles. It, too, is recalled as a rebirth in radicalism. The Goldmans had followed their daughters to Rochester; Emma, who had hoped to escape into marriage, found herself yet more domesticated and once again in her father’s household. “[L]ife became insupportable,” she wrote. “I was saved from utter despair by my interest in the Haymarket events.”¹⁷ As Goldman records, it was a violent act, almost a breaking of vessels, that propelled her into the realm of the revolutionary. When an unidentified woman in her parents’ home scorns the Chicago anarchists, Emma throws

15 Ezra Mendelsohn, “The Russian Roots of the American Jewish Labor Movement,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 16 (1976), 150-177; Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (New York: 1982), p. 453.

16 Goldman, *LML*, pp. 10-12, 26-29.

17 Goldman, *LML*, p. 23.

American Jewish History

a pitcher of water and pounces upon her in a rage, only to be forced away by relatives:

The terrified woman made for the door and I dropped to the ground in a fit of crying. I was put to bed . . . The next morning I woke as from a long illness, but free from the numbness and the depression of those harrowing weeks of waiting, ending with the final shock. A great ideal, a burning faith, a determination to dedicate myself to the memory of my martyred comrades, to make their cause my own, to make known to the world their beautiful lives and heroic deaths.¹⁸

The Haymarket victims appear throughout the autobiography, invoked as spiritual godfathers in Goldman's quest for the ideal. In truth, though, they were only the prototype of a series of martyrs to the cause who served as symbols of personal rebellion and revolutionary commitment. As Gerald Sonn has argued, anarchist bomb-throwing and assassination was essentially "not a functional but a symbolic act" by which anarchists "collapsed the revolutionary process into one act that metaphorically stood for the whole." Yet the unsatisfying results of such violence led to ambivalence and dissension among anarchists in America. The French anarchists tried to overcome this dilemma by shifting emphasis from symbolic expression or the cult of the act to a "religious valuation of the terrorists' self-sacrifice."¹⁹ A similar shift can be seen in Goldman's stress on the Haymarket martyrs' (and later, her own) ultimate gifts to the cause. But Goldman's implication in the violent acts of others—in Alexander Berkman's 1893 attack on Henry Clay Frick (which she had supported) and in the 1901 assassination of President McKinley by Leon Czolgosz (who had met Goldman and claimed to be her follower)—made it impossible for her to definitely reject the *attentat*, the revolutionist's symbolic act of violence. She spoke of both men as martyrs long after her shift to a more pragmatic view of revolution. At annual memorial meetings she stressed the assassins' inner state, their "supersensitiveness to the wrong and injustice surrounding them." "Poor Leon Czolgosz," she wrote, "your crime consisted of too sensitive a social consciousness."²⁰ Such spiritual achievement could not be

18 Goldman, *LML*, p. 10.

19 Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics*, pp. 240, 262.

20 Goldman, "The Psychology of Political Violence," *Anarchism and Other Essays* (1911. repr. New York: 1970), pp. 80, 90; Goldman, *ME* 1 (1906), 11-19; *ME* 6 (1911), 235.

The Case of Emma Goldman

forsaken. It was too important to Goldman's own identity as an anarchist revolutionary.

Anarchist violence became the foremost obstacle to Goldman's success as a specifically anarchist agitator and in the long run served as the focus of a generation's fears of subversion. In the first stage of her independent career (after Berkman's incarceration), Goldman transcended this problematic aspect of anarchist ideology—and the divisions it had spawned among New York's immigrant anarchists—by throwing herself into social work and labor organizing during the unprecedented depression of 1893. She reaffirmed the revolutionary struggle (and her role in it) but distanced herself from organized movements. At a mass meeting in Union Square that summer, she told a crowd

“I come to you tonight representing no class or no politics. We need neither socialists nor anarchists to lead us on. The anarchists are a terrible people who will use you only for their own ends. Hunger is what will lead us on.

“Demonstrate before the palaces of the rich; demand work. If they do not give you work, demand bread. If they deny you both, take bread. It is your sacred right!”²¹

“Why did you let that woman in?” asked Joseph Barondess at one meeting. “Mein gott, she'll be my ruin!”²² Goldman attempted to recreate herself as the natural leader of the enraged masses, bypassing not just the feuding anarchists but even Barondess—the man who, by her own account, had invited her back to the East Side to organize women garment workers. Arrested, tried, and imprisoned for inciting to riot, she succeeded in making herself “an important personage.”²³ In *Living My Life*, Goldman reveals much by narrating the episode as if the arrest and trial had made her famous; actually, she had already earned the nickname “Red Emma” and appeared in headlines as the “High Priestess of Anarchy” and “the Joan of Arc of the Social Revolution.”²⁴ I would call this the culmination of the first stage of Goldman's spiritualized radicalism, in which the ideal of martyrdom is successfully subsumed into her own self-sacrifice. She had appealed to “sacred”

21 *New York Sun*, Aug. 22, 1893; Goldman, *LML*, p. 123.

22 *New York Sun*, Aug. 20, 1893.

23 Goldman, *LML*, pp. 47-54.

24 *New York World*, Aug. 19, 1893; *New York Sun*, Aug. 19, 20, 1893; *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 23, 1893.

American Jewish History

rights, was thrown in jail, and emerged a heroine; she had entered the pantheon of what Sonn has called the “anachrists.”

Yet this self-fashioning did not take place all in Goldman’s head. It was reinforced by the contemporary sources and instruments of power—the state and the mainstream press. They reciprocated in the definition of absolute good and intolerable evil. The *New York Times* thundered against “tremendous designs against the peace and dignity of the people of the state of New York.” Venturing into “anarchy’s dingy stronghold,” one journalist mocked both uptown fears and downtown realities in describing the “hordes of pinched and frowzy foreigners with the squat, swollen faces, the harsh beards . . . preparing for the threatened destruction of the city at nightfall.” The complaint filed against Goldman in court read

Emma Goldman, being an evilly disposed and pernicious person, did wickedly and perniciously raise insurrections, [illegible], and riots in the city of New York, and did threaten to take and carry away goods and chattels and personal property of the good citizens of New York, and did threaten to procure arms and ammunition and weapons whereby to consummate and execute the said wicked and unlawful threats.²⁵

Goldman proposed to use the trial as a forum for her views. The *Times* countered this strategy in its reportage of her arraignment, at which “She Assumed an Air of Martyrdom Ridiculous to All Except the Army of the Unwashed.”²⁶

Goldman emerged from prison a cause unto herself. But what does one do after such an apotheosis? Despite her zest for the incendiary she had already admitted that the revolution would probably not occur for at least another 25 years.²⁷ Consequently, the next half-decade can be seen as a transitional period. During the later 1890s, Goldman took several steps that helped change the character of her radicalism. First, she improved her English and made her first long-distance speaking trips. She soon drew audiences larger than the small anarchist cells that sponsored her trips. Goldman also took two year-long journeys to Europe, where she worked with anarchist movements that had evolved into anarcho-syndicalisms similar to that later advanced in the United States by the IWW. Finally, she immersed herself in Nietzsche, Max Stirner,

25 *New York Times*, Aug. 21, 1893; *New York Sun*, Sept. 12, 1893.

26 *New York Times*, Sept. 15, 1893.

27 Goldman, interview with Nellie Bly, *New York World*, Sept. 17, 1893.

The Case of Emma Goldman

Peter Kropotkin, and in the avant-garde art and drama of fin-de-siècle Paris and Vienna.²⁸ By the turn of the century, Goldman had found ways to integrate the traditional anarchist criticisms of the church and state with her own feminism and romantic individualism. She came to believe that the rebel must attack not mere institutions but the “internal tyrants” of prejudice and superstition that supported them.²⁹ She continued to urge the necessity of an ideal—anarchism—“to raise man out of the inertia and humdrum of his existence and turn the abject slave into an heroic figure.”³⁰ But she now insisted that “the key to the anarchist revolution was a revolution in morality, the ‘transvaluation of all values,’ a conquest of the ‘phantoms’ that held people captive.”³¹ This stress on ideas became the core of her opposition to other radical programs of her day, particularly those of socialists who campaigned for office and suffragists who sought the vote. “True emancipation,” she wrote, “begins in a woman’s soul.”³²

This shift in identity and style from fomenter of collective action to crusader for a new morality coincided with Goldman’s increasing disillusion with mass politics and a realization that she would have to remain an independent, maverick activist. Of course, throughout her radical career she lent her energies to collective efforts, including the largest strikes of the era (not to mention two revolutions—the Russian and the Spanish). But her offers of aid were often refused. Goldman’s undiminished status as a Great American Enemy made the old New York niche less and less comfortable. Even before the Czolgosz affair, she told Abraham Cahan

I have spent years in an honest and conscientious effort to enlighten the American working man . . . What is the result? My very name makes him shiver; the newspapers have invented thousands of malicious lies about me, the parsons have denounced me from their pulpits and the fakirs who

28 Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America* (Boston: 1984), pp. 45-55; Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* (Chicago: 1961), pp. 64-66, 102-107.

29 Goldman, “The Tragedy of Women’s Emancipation,” *Anarchism and Other Essays*, p. 221.

30 Goldman, “The Individual, Society, and the State,” *RES*, p. 122.

31 Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, p. 98; Alix Kates Shulman, “Introduction,” *RES*, pp. 6-8; Marsha Hewitt, “Emma Goldman: The Case for Anarchofeminism” in Dmitri Roussopolous ed., *The Anarchist Papers* (Montreal: 1985), pp. 167-175.

32 Goldman, “The Tragedy of Women’s Emancipation,” pp. 158-167.

American Jewish History

prey upon the workingman, the so-called labor leaders, have pictured me as a sort of godmother to the devil himself. From reading all those ghost stories, you would believe that I am in the habit of murdering a dozen people before breakfast, burning down a couple of blocks for lunch, and perhaps blowing up a whole country before I get my dinner. And the American workingman swallows all these lies and takes them for gospel truths.³³

Goldman's development as a radical activist cannot be understood outside the context of the fame she achieved in the 1890s. The larger cultural critique she developed was a response not just to her own past but to her changing conception of American culture and that culture's reaction to an image of Emma Goldman. The bearer of emancipation saw herself being seen as a devil by the very masses she sought to save—even before her name was telegraphed all over the country in association with that of McKinley's assassin. In the aftermath of 1901 and the suppression of nearly all anarchist activity, Goldman went underground, doing her most effective work under the alias of E. G. Smith. By the time new causes emerged to a mood of Progressive optimism, Goldman had traveled the country many times and had truly transcended New York. With the founding of the journal *Mother Earth* she sought to create an indigenous anarchist movement.³⁴ It is on this period that the remainder of my essay will focus, and on a rarely examined but important aspect of Goldman's activity: her anti-Christianity and, briefly, her ambivalent attitudes toward her own Jewish identity. In these aspects of her radicalism, the reactions of others to them, and her own counterreactions, we can see in greatest relief Goldman's counterreligious challenge to mainstream American faiths.

Between 1906 and her imprisonment a dozen years later, Emma Goldman developed a regular, if frenetic, round of activity. When in New York (where she edited *Mother Earth*), she gave a series of weekly meetings, often traveling on weekdays to nearby cities. In the spring and early summer months she would tour the rest of the Northeast, the Midwest, and the West, speaking on topics that varied from "The Real Meaning of Anarchy" to "Women Under Anarchism" and "The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Drama."

33 Abraham Cahan, "High Priestess of Anarchy Abandons America" [1899] in Moses Rischin, ed., *Grandma Never Lived in America: The New Journalism of Abraham Cahan* (Bloomington: 1985), pp. 329-330.

34 Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, pp. 115-120.

The Case of Emma Goldman

Though usually planned in advance, Goldman's meetings could be subject to the whims of newspapers (which refused to take her advertisements) and the less predictable actions of local officials and police, who often intimidated hallkeepers or simply forbade meetings to proceed. Ensuing free speech fights often won her valuable sympathy from intellectual elites but also accentuated the polarizing tendency that met most of Goldman's endeavors. She continually juxtaposed enlightened spirits with minds festering in darkness. The "force of habit" is behind police bullying and popular acquiescence; all the more essential, then, are those vital few who have "the habit of rebellion . . . whose nature nurtures rebellion to a habit; and though they meet with a thousand obstacles, they will continue to rebel, even if their lives were at stake."³⁵ The "revolutionary spirit" continues to be of utmost value; it is contrasted with the "narrow" spirit of other places (such as the University of Kansas law school, where she gave a poorly attended lecture entitled "Why Laws Fail").³⁶ Outright suppression made it all the easier for Goldman to equate herself with an ideal that was, in essence, self-liberation. "They [the police] might as well attempt to direct the course of the stars as to direct the course of my life's work," she boasted to *Mother Earth* readers.³⁷ Goldman made the work her own by forming personal bonds and temporary allegiances everywhere and by keeping herself in constant circulation. She melded her cultural critique with contemporary anarchism by joining, at home, with the bohemian radicals of Greenwich Village and, on the road, with the direct-action, one-big-union Wobblies (IWW). Like her close friend Hutchins Hapgood, she saw both groups as evidence of spiritual regeneration—omens and means of nascent revolt against the repressive Puritanism exemplified in religion and the state.³⁸

Yet, unlike the rebels of Bohemia and the Jewish anarchists, Goldman did not remain in New York: she sought to confront America. In her effort to do so, the militant anti-Judaism of the East Side anarchists became for her an equally intransigent anti-Christianity. In such talks as "The Failure of Christianity" and

35 Goldman, "Our Fight," *ME* 3 (1909), 187.

36 Goldman, "On the Trail," *ME* 5 (1911), 273.

37 Goldman, "Our Friends, the Enemy," *ME* 4 (1910), 111.

38 Hutchins Hapgood, "The New Bohemia," MS in Hutchins Hapgood Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, and David Waldstreicher, "The Usable Present: Hutchins Hapgood, Labor Journalism, and Romantic Radicalism, 1905-14" (unpub. paper in the author's possession, 1989), and, more generally, Leslie Fishbein, *Rebels in Bohemia: The Radicals of The Masses, 1890-1917* (Chapel Hill: 1984).

American Jewish History

“The Philosophy of Atheism” Goldman fills out her anarchist heritage with generous helpings of Nietzsche, accusing religion in general and Christianity in particular of “befogging the human mind and stifling the human heart.”³⁹ Moreover, she specialized in preaching antireligion to church audiences. At a “Religious Philosophies Conference” in San Francisco in 1915

she said man’s belief in an external power had kept him from discovering himself, and she recommended that he first destroy the phantoms of his own creation in order that he might build anew a civilization which would make this earth fit for mankind. Miss Goldman further recommended that heaven, by deed of gift, be presented to God and the Angels; and that for good measure the priests, preachers, rabbis, and other useless paraphernalia be thrown in.⁴⁰

This was no arbitrary attack. America experienced a revival of religious observance (and of nationalism) before the First World War. And Goldman was all too aware of the abilities of other national figures to tap into one or both of these essential ideologies. From Eugene V. Debs to William Jennings Bryan to Billy Sunday, all of the most popular orators of the day drew on evangelical Protestantism. Christic imagery suffused the speeches of labor leaders; in the Southwest, for example, radicalizing methods (including “Socialist encampments”) drew on the revival tradition. Even the militantly antipatriotic Wobblies appealed regularly

39 Goldman, “The Failure of Christianity” and “The Philosophy of Atheism,” *RES* pp. 232-248, quote at p. 243. See also notices for speeches which have apparently not survived. “The Devil Exonerated” and “The Danger in the Growing Power of the Church,” *ME* 3 (1908), 304, and *ME* 5 (1910), 285.

40 David Leigh, “Emma Goldman in San Francisco,” *ME* 10 (1915), 280.

41 Herbert G. Gutman, “Protestantism and the American Labor Movement,” in *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: 1976), pp. 79-117; Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the USA* (New York: 1987), pp. 61, 81-85; James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism* (Baton Rouge: 1978); Nick Salvatore, “Americans as Radicals,” *Radical History Review* 24 (1980), 149-150; Blaine McKinley, “‘A Religion of the New Time’: Anarchist Memorials to the Haymarket Martyrs, 1888-1917,” *Labor History* 28 (1987), 386-400; Donald E. Winters, *The Soul of the Wobblies* (Westport: 1985); Ken Fones-Wolf, *Trade-Union Gospel: Christianity and Labor in Industrial Philadelphia, 1865-1915* (Philadelphia: 1989).

Peter Conn discusses Goldman’s own “displaced religious discourse” in *The Divided Mind: Intellect and Ideology in America, 1898-1917* (New York: 1983), pp. 312-313. See also Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile* (Boston: 1989), pp. 143-144.

The Case of Emma Goldman

to Jesus as the prototypical abused workingman and revolutionary martyr, contrasting “real” Christianity with that of the capitalists.⁴¹ Goldman could wax poetic over the large soul of Debs and “our I.W.W. boys,” but she could only briefly and abstractly join her appeal to theirs.

Nor could she avoid the issue. Goldman was received as one in a procession of preachers of gospels social, evangelical, and radical. Her feminism, her antistatism, and her anticapitalism set her apart—but so did her antireligion. In fact, she may well have accentuated that idiom in order to evoke interest and prove the singularity of her own program. American popular ideologies held a pantheon of Christs and anti-Christs; it is a measure of Goldman’s Americanization as a radical that her language consciously and unconsciously took on that of American Christianity. So many came to a Seattle meeting, she joked, that she must have been mistaken for a revivalist: the crowds “stayed even though they were not asked to repent.”⁴² In 1909, at Houston, “we secured a hall from some Catholic order, but when it became known that I would speak, they sent a committee to pay all our expenses and begged to be released from their contract. Who ever heard of a Catholic bargain with Hell?”⁴³

Defined as Savior or as Satan, Goldman played the antithesis with a droll, endearing humor. Police who arrest her are dubbed “fine Christians” who save the city from anarchist anti-Christs. She lambastes the “Christian hearts” who let Berkman rot in jail and the “Christian civilization” that lynches blacks and assaults Japanese immigrants. “Out of Christian kindness and American loyalty” the government “annulled” her husband’s citizenship papers, rendering her a resident alien.⁴⁴ Goldman and the *Mother Earth* group improvised a creative anti-Christianity—a running joke on their difference that at the same time provided ways of supporting it. At one of their annual Red Revels, Goldman, dressed as a nun, cleared the dance floor for a rendition of the “Anarchist’s Slide.” In the magazine’s pages, Goldman annually ridiculed the sham of Christmas and reversed Christian cosmologies in short parables with titles like “Christmas Adventures of Jesus” and “The New Gospel.”

It would be worth reading one of these pieces closely; they have received no attention from scholars but reveal a great deal about

42 Goldman, *ME* 6 (1911), 152.

43 Goldman, “The End of the Odyssey,” *ME* 4 (1909), 50; *ME* 3 (1908), 353-354.

44 Goldman, *ME* 7 (1912), 117; *ME* 3 (1909), 348; “The Situation in America,” *ME* 2 (1908), 325; “A Woman Without a Country,” *ME* 4 (1909), 81-82.

American Jewish History

the dynamics of Goldman's American radicalism. In "Defying the Gods" (July 1908) the Almighty calls a meeting of his lieutenants. "The uniformed species of man," (the police) have failed to subdue the sons of Lucifer (the anarchists). One adviser suggests "watching the portals of the Sacred Shrine," but these radicals cannot be dismissed as unassimilated immigrants.

"Deport them," suggested another counsellor, Mr. Oscar Straus, one of the Lord's chosen people. The suggestion threw the almighty into a fearful spasm. "Deport them!" he thundered, "shall I begin with my own Son, then? That would prove the scandal of the ages. It's well enough for a father to kill his child, but deport him—never!" . . .

"True, Anarchism cannot be destroyed," mused the Divine Father, "it has withstood all forms of persecution. Some anarchists cannot even be damned; there is that devilish E. G. What have my uniformed angels not done to her; still, here she is, as irrepressible as ever. She has now visited 27 cities and blasphemed me and my sacred institutions 90 times. If only she could be disposed of."

Finally, the Almighty sends light and wind upon the frozen Rockies, causing flooding rains and delaying Goldman's scheduled arrival in Butte, Montana.⁴⁵

The irony with which God and his angels are made spiteful and not a little ineffective—in contrast to the Satanic anarchists—is apparent. Refiguring the Almighty as the head of state, Goldman makes scandal-ridden religion a potent metaphor for nationalism and a scandal-ridden politics. Less apparent to us, perhaps, is the allegory of President Roosevelt and his cabinet debating immigration policy (and Goldman's own precarious status). Straus, the new Secretary of Commerce and Labor, is willing to sell out certain of his Jewish brethren (in this case, Christ/Goldman). State/religious persecution is hypocritical: they will make martyrs out of the anarchist anti-Christ before casting them out, which "would prove the scandal of the ages." Yet Goldman emerges triumphant, storm-tossed but still "irrepressible." Rhetorically, the parable links the state, religious myth, and the persecution of Goldman herself. A mock countermyth, it plays with real ideologies and very real dangers.

45 Goldman, "Defying the Gods," *ME* 3 (1908), 223-224.

The Case of Emma Goldman

Goldman's antireligious speeches similarly shift antinomies to her advantage. Christ was a meek, sentimental reformer: "compared with Socrates and Bruno, with the great martyrs of Russia, with the Chicago anarchists . . . [he] cuts a poor figure indeed." Religions keep people from thinking for themselves; their "'Divine Truth,' rewards and punishments are the trademarks of the largest, the most corrupt and pernicious, the most powerful and lucrative industry in the world, not exceeding the industry of manufacturing guns and munitions." Religion is an analogue for capitalism; in attempting to be liberal, it really seeks to create "one denominational trust" to head off any truly new ideas. And Goldman is at her most merciless with respect to a certain dark twin of the believing world:

Religious . . . meetings and revivals with Billy Sunday as their champion—methods which must outrage every refined sense, and which in their effect upon the ignorant and curious often tend to create a mild state of insanity not infrequently coupled with eroto-mania.⁴⁶

Goldman is so piqued here that she echoes the genteel critique of her own talks on free love, contraception, and homosexuality. Her critique of revivalist enthusiasm is the mirror image of the very real effect she had on many of her admirers. "There is nothing wrong with Miss Goldman's gospel," wrote newspaper editor William Marion Reedy, "except this: she is about eight thousand years ahead of her age." Roger Baldwin remembered a Goldman speech as "the eye opener of my life," as did a young Henry Miller.⁴⁷ By all accounts such experiences were common, if often temporary. Though she increasingly lamented the inability of "the spoken word" to effect the kind of cultural transformation she envisioned, speeches and meetings remained the linchpin of Goldman's radical activity.⁴⁸

46 Goldman, "Failure of Christianity," "Philosophy of Atheism," pp. 233-240, 243-244. See also Roger Bruns, *The Damndest Radical: The Life and World of Ben Reitman* (Urbana: 1987), pp. 144-152, for Goldman's crusade against Billy Sunday.

47 William Marion Reedy, "Daughter of the Dream," repr. in *ME3* (1908), quoted at 357; Baldwin cited in Martha Solomon, *Emma Goldman* (Boston: 1987), p. 150; Miller in Winifred L. Frazer, *E.G. and E.G.O.: Emma Goldman and The Iceman Cometh* (Gainesville: 1974), p. 17.

48 On Goldman's disillusionment with "the spoken word" see her "Preface" and "Minorities and Majorities" in *Anarchism and Other Essays*, pp. 41-46, 69-78.

American Jewish History

In a universe of competing redemptive creeds, what, finally, was different about her own? To Goldman, only anarchism refused to tie the individual to a larger group morality. In the prewar era she employed the metaphors of religion in one more crucial fashion: to distinguish herself from other anticapitalists. By interdicting its members from debating with her, the “Socialist machine” earned equation with the Catholic church.⁴⁹ “Scientific Socialism” entailed cold compromise and worship at the false shrine of electoral politics.

Its cowardice of authority and intolerance of everything not baptized in the holy church of the Marxian-Engels rites, are really sickening. Of course, there are exceptions, but they merely prove the rule. The few socialists of independent mind and spirit are not very long tolerated by the Holy Synod.⁵⁰

In sum, then, Goldman’s is a revolutionary creed that, like all radicalisms and most American minority religions, jealously guards its own margins. It even appropriates the language of the dominant faith in defining the holy and profane. Like the millennarians of old, Goldman seeks a purified identity in which public and private are joined, or transcended. She differs mainly—and they are critical differences—in her absolute insistence on personal fulfillment as the measure, and in her absolute refusal of domination, indeed, of the authority of any one creed at all.

It is a measure of Goldman’s effort to transform American culture that she translated her constellation of value into languages of anti-Christianity and antinationalism. It is this that made her different from socialists like Abraham Cahan and Morris Hillquit, who eventually adopted patriotic styles, and from the East Side Yiddishist anarchists, who rejected acculturation in favor of ideological purity.⁵¹ Assimilation, it seems, is a various thing. But where does Goldman fit in the cultural, religious, and political spectrum of American Jewry? I have tried to account for her changing radical styles and their relation to religion as an analytical category and a historical practice. But finally, how Jewish?

Ironically enough, Goldman can serve as a model of American Jewish radicalism and American Jewry in general because of the

49 Goldman, *ME* 7 (1912), 25.

50 Goldman, *ME* 4 (1909), 51.

51 Paul Buhle, “The Freiheit: A Personal Recollection,” *The Book Peddler* 11-12 (Summer 1989), 17-18.

The Case of Emma Goldman

very ambivalence and contingency of her Jewish identity. She was usually just as hard on Judaism as on all other theisms. Yet, even when Goldman moved beyond immigrant neighborhoods in attempts to awaken the native born, she continued to give two lectures in most towns—one English, one “Jewish.”⁵² These Yiddish-speaking audiences continued to form her most solid base of support, turning out even when “American” audiences disappointed. Often Goldman complained that these loyal followers were “still too Jewish . . . to really appreciate the great necessity of a wide-spread agitation in the language of the country they live in.” Ever the universalist, she remained fervently and vocally anti-Zionist. Yet, over the years, she gained an appreciation of the obstacles to Jewish radical activity in places where the gentiles remained “in the clutches of the church.” “I should not condemn them,” she wrote to her frustrated manager, Ben Reitman, “because they are a persecuted people and owe their survival only to the capacity of sticking together.”⁵³

Here the Jews command sympathy and the right to be spoken to in their own language; but in addressing Reitman (a half-Jew and sometime Christian) Goldman uses the distancing third-person pronoun: “they.” Yet having moved from ritual anti-Judaism to ritual anti-Christianity, Goldman could also celebrate what she saw as American Jews’ exceptional radicalism. When they turn out for meetings, the Jews are her race; and in a language familiar to readers of Irving Howe, Goldman contrasts the Jewish Left with their native-born comrades: “the bulk of our American radicals would probably die of inertia and anemia, were it not for the Jews constantly infusing new blood into their system.” Jews are “the mainstay of every revolutionary endeavor”—but most revealingly, such approval is often evoked in instances of conflict *within* the Jewish community over Goldman’s own presence. Good Jewish sons steal their mothers’ candlesticks to light dark meeting halls; bad Jewish fathers complain to the mayor about the menace of Red

52 In her otherwise excellent biography Alice Wexler states that Goldman did not speak in Yiddish until 1908 (Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, p. 88). While it is true that Goldman like many other Jewish radicals looked down on the “jargon,” newspaper accounts note that her German and Russian were peppered with Yiddishisms. Moreover, notices for “Jewish” lectures appear in *Mother Earth* from its beginning in 1906.

53 Goldman, *ME* 3 (1908), 353-354; Goldman to Ben Reitman, Oct. 1914, in Candace Falk, *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman* (New York: 1984), p. 231.

American Jewish History

Emma. The latter, the “French and German” Jews, had assimilated “at the expense of their souls.”⁵⁴

Like so many Jews, Emma Goldman defended the tribe from the attacks of outsiders, yet in an insider voice (in the pages of *Mother Earth*) cast praise on some and blame on others, negotiating in the process her own Jewish identity. Having escaped the Jewish ghetto of Rochester that ostracized her at 20, she returned as a radical of 20 years tenure to decry the town’s *American* provincialism.⁵⁵ Goldman’s Jewish identity and her radical identity developed together, in relation to a succession of familial, local, and political contexts. She was a radical Jewish immigrant woman from New York who traveled around the country urging social and cultural revolution; we can only imagine the mosaic of perceptions and counterperceptions buried beneath a reified, recalled identity as an anarchist martyr. A maverick who invented her own religion, Goldman’s American experience may remind us of the complex negotiations involved in being other than Christian and outside the political center. If marginality means anything, it means no one thing but motion. Like so many of the Jewish leftists who came after her, she moved constantly in and out of the East Side, rediscovering what it meant to not be Christian, reinventing what it could mean to be Jewish, reimagining what it might mean to be radical.

54 Goldman, *ME* 3 (1908), 36-37; *ME* 4 (1909), 212; *ME* 10 (1916), 402; *ME* 6 (1911), 114.

55 Goldman, *LML*, p. 25; *ME* 5 (1910), 22.