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Interaction and Identity: Jews and Christians in Nineteenth Century New Orleans¹

by

Scott Langston

On June 11, 1886, James K. Gutheim, rabbi of Reform congregation Temple Sinai of New Orleans, Louisiana, died. His death provoked an outpouring of grief and sadness that enveloped the city as well as the state. Meeting *en banc* [in full court], the Civil District Court heard a eulogy by Judge Frank Adair Monroe and then canceled court and rescheduled cases. The Louisiana Senate adjourned as a symbol of honor and respect after hearing a eulogy and passing a number of resolutions offered by Senator Lawrence O'Donnell regarding Gutheim. Among other traits, the senator noted that the rabbi lived all his life by the Golden Rule. At his funeral, federal, state, and local officials as well as people from all classes and creeds gathered to pay their respects. The Rev. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, longtime pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans and a minister influential throughout the South, eulogized Gutheim during the funeral service. In the words of Palmer, Gutheim was:

the incarnation of virtue and religion, in whom these are embodied as a living personal agency to renew and bless mankind. This is a kind of gospel which men easily understand, for while they may fail to read the black letter of our different schools of philosophy, or even to interpret aright the dogmas of a religious creed, these are instantly comprehended when translated into

the daily actions of a pure and virtuous life. It is the printing in raised type which sets abstract principles in such relief before the eye that he who runs may read.²

Palmer had used the most Christian of terms—incarnation and gospel—to describe the rabbi and to emphasize how the actions of Gutheim had transcended religious creeds.

Sixteen years later, on May 28, 1902, Palmer died in New Orleans. Rabbi Max Heller, Gutheim's successor at Temple Sinai, extolled Palmer as one who represented the staunchest orthodoxy in his denomination and yet one who "swept away every barrier," and, therefore, "was the minister of all of us."³ The Reform rabbi made an interesting choice of words by juxtaposing "orthodoxy" with the elimination of all barriers, a characteristic usually not associated with religious orthodoxy unless the barriers are swept away so as to produce uniform beliefs.

Several months after Palmer's death, two old friends of Palmer addressed the audience at his memorial service on November 16. The first was the Rev. Eugene Daniel of the Synod of Virginia and the second was Rabbi Isaac L. Leucht of Touro Synagogue, a Reform congregation in New Orleans. Leucht summarized his relationship with Palmer in the following words, "I have come [to speak] because I loved him and he was my friend for so many years, and because we together were seeking light. Although seeking it upon different paths, we met and never quarreled as to its source." He extolled Palmer's "broadmindedness and large-heartedness," as well as the tenacity with which he clung to his convictions. According to Leucht, Palmer was no bigot or zealot, but "rose to the level of forbearance and broad-mindedness rarely found, pardon me, among theologians."⁴

Were the expressions of Palmer, Leucht, and Heller mere platitudes spoken over the dead, or did they represent a more complex relationship between these Jewish and Christian leaders of New Orleans? Historian Leonard Dinnerstein argued that the understanding of the United States as a Christian-Protestant nation has been a dominant theme in American history but also "an

ominous portent for interfaith friction." Therefore Jews always were considered outsiders; the barrier of religion was too difficult to overcome. Leonard Rogoff, in discussing the racial status of the southern Jew, noted that, "In the American South after Reconstruction, a new social line between Jew and white gentile followed the disengagement of white and black." Furthermore, the Gilded Age in New Orleans saw an increase in what one scholar has called "an overt anti-Semitism."⁵ Without disputing the validity of these generalizations as applied to the broader southern and national contexts, Jewish-Christian relations in New Orleans seem to offer an exception. As one examines this relationship more closely, it appears that religion helped at least a portion of New Orleanian society to cohere by both integrating and disintegrating religious and ethnic/racial boundaries. While Jews and Christians used religion to strengthen their respective self-identities, they also used it to broaden their conceptions of national identity. They did so by appropriating the religious language and concepts of both traditions, as well as American symbols, and by uniting to combat common threats. Such efforts resulted in redefined religious and national identities for Jews and Christians in New Orleans, and produced communities of faith that cooperated with each other.

Appropriation of Religious Language and Concepts

Benjamin Morgan Palmer was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1818. The son and nephew of Presbyterian ministers, he graduated from the University of Georgia in 1838 and the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1841. He served as pastor in Georgia and South Carolina and even taught briefly at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary before accepting the pastorate of New Orleans' First Presbyterian Church. In December 1856 he and his family moved to New Orleans and began his new ministry.

A few months prior to his move, Palmer published an article, "The Import of Hebrew History," in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, in which he reviewed *Post-Biblical History of the Jews* by New York rabbi, Dr. Morris J. Raphall. In essence, Palmer appropriated

the Jewish doctrine of monotheism to demonstrate the legitimacy of Christianity, in general, and Protestant Christianity, in particular. Palmer reasoned that “only because there is one God, can there be but one religion; and Judaism, by asserting the first, opened the way for the advent of the second in the Gospel of Christ.” By making monotheism crucial to God’s plan, Judaism then could be portrayed as preparing the way for Christianity, a monotheistic, but also trinitarian religion.⁶ With no conception of coexisting expressions of truth in religion, Palmer saw a divine progression from Judaism to Christianity. Several years earlier, Palmer had argued that the Jewish nation “was only an envelope for the church; the mere shell or rind thrown around it for temporary protection, afterward to be thrown off by its development.”⁷ Now he applied the same metaphor to describe the relationship between the Jewish religion and nation and concluded, “The Hebrew nation was but the envelope of the Hebrew Church. When the moment should arrive that this Church must be stripped of its exclusiveness and become truly Catholic, the Hebrew nationality must, like the bark or rind of certain fruits, burst open to emancipate the Church it so long enclosed.”⁸

In these comments, Palmer acknowledged the necessity of Judaism in God’s plan for the world. He also used Judaism’s status to demonstrate the supremacy of Protestantism. His reference to the Jewish religion as the “Hebrew Church,” while perhaps not uncommon in nineteenth century discourse, seemed to argue against both the supremacy of Roman Catholicism and of the United States government. Palmer explained the scattering of the Jewish nation as an effort to make it truly catholic. Clearly Palmer intended to emphasize the universal nature of the scattering, but implicitly he seemed to intimate that a truly catholic church existed in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church; that true church—Protestantism—would be the heir to Judaism.⁹ Furthermore, he understood the disintegration of the “Hebrew nation” as a prerequisite for the dissemination of the true church. Organized according to self-governing tribes and united under one central government, the Hebrew monarchy, according to Palmer, did not exercise central control. Although unequal in

*Reverend Benjamin Morgan Palmer.
After the Galveston Hurricane of 1900, when the relief efforts
organized by the New Orleans B'nai B'rith were criticized
as being too sectarian, Palmer publicly defended them.
(With permission from the First Presbyterian Church,
New Orleans, Louisiana. Photo by Fred Kahn.)*

wealth and population, all the tribes were equal in political dignity. Thus, Palmer considered the Hebrew form of government to be a constitutional monarchy, based on popular approval, with two legislative bodies, the Senate and "the body of the people." Furthermore, throughout history, the Jewish religious officials "stood together as conservators of popular rights against regal encroachments, for the stability of the constitution against the innovations of wicked rulers." Why then, asked Palmer, would such a marvelous form of government be destroyed? Divine providence led the people to dissolve the government so that it would not thwart its initial purpose, that is, the dissemination of divine truth. His interpretation gave Palmer a framework from which he could interpret current events and institutional relationships. Foreshadowing the coming Civil War, he surmised that "there are periods in history when secret forces are preparing, to burst out ere long with irrepressible power . . . and such an age is that upon which we are now entering." Concluding that the relationship of Christianity to Judaism argued for Christianity's legitimacy, he asked, "Can that system [Christianity] be false, whose deep foundations are thus laid in the distant past . . . and whose forerunner is this religious race?"¹⁰

By lashing Protestantism to Judaic notions of monotheism and government, Palmer made religious and political commentary. The truly catholic religion, Protestant Christianity, emerged under God's plan from Judaism. The Hebrew government, while originally intended to house and protect the Jewish religion, had to be destroyed by the people once it departed from its divine purpose. As an analog to the situation in the United States in the mid-1850s, Palmer emphasized the role of the Jewish religious leadership in advocating the rights of the people against the monarchy's efforts to exercise control. He saw southern Protestant ministers performing a similar role in relationship to the government as did the ancient Israelite religious leadership. As the United States government increasingly acted as an autocracy, southern Protestant Christianity stood against it as the legitimate interpreter of God's purposes. Thus, Palmer sought to authenticate southern Protestantism by associating it with Judaism.

Palmer maintained his belief in the vital connection between Judaism and Christianity throughout his life. In a sermon preached on the first day of 1900, he interpreted the progress of the United States in terms of the church of God being held "in the embrace of the ancient Hebrew people." Just as God judged the Canaanites and removed them from the land in order to make room for his chosen people,

when the Indians had, for countless centuries, neglected the soil, had no worship to offer to the true God, with scarcely any serious occupation but murderous inter-tribal wars, the time came at length when, as I view it, in the just judgment of a righteous and holy God, although it may have been worked out through the simple avarice and voracity of the race that subdued them, the Indian has been swept from the earth, and a great Christian nation, over 75,000,000 strong, rises up on this day . . . to give to him the honor which is his due.¹¹

In his appropriation of Jewish concepts and his associating Judaism and Christianity, Palmer fashioned a boundary, as well as a pathway, between the religions. Just as one peels back the rind to eat the fruit, or opens the envelope to read the letter, so too could one understand the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Distinctions indeed existed between the two, and, in Palmer's mind, Christianity had superseded Judaism. He, however, conceived of the relationship as progressive or chronological. As a result, the two religions could not be God's chosen instrument at the same time. This understanding highlighted the connection between Judaism and Christianity. Just as the rind and the envelope were essential elements to the fruit and the letter, so too was Judaism essential to Christianity. For Palmer, Jews were not in the same category as Indians. Indians did not worship the true God, and, therefore, were subject to his judgment. Jews, on the other hand, played an essential role not only in the history of Christianity, but also in the history of the United States. This connection created in Palmer a respect for Jews and Judaism that allowed him to embrace Jews in tangible ways without sacrificing the distinctiveness of Christianity.

He, therefore, could refer to Gutheim as the incarnation and the gospel.

Appropriation of American Symbols

The embracing of Jews by a leading Protestant figure of New Orleanian and southern society assisted Jews in gaining acceptance and helped legitimate them in the eyes of Christians who misunderstood many Jewish customs and beliefs. This misunderstanding could inhibit Jewish attempts, especially those by Jewish immigrants, to be accepted and could also foster anti-Semitism. Men like Gutheim, Leucht, and Heller welcomed the association with individuals like Palmer. Thus, religion acted as an aid in overcoming ethnic or nationalistic boundaries. Jews could claim to be Americans in spite of their religious differences with the majority and could even find prominent members of that majority who embraced their claim. In so doing, religion fostered Jewish and Christian self-identities while simultaneously broadening American identity.

The use of civil and religious holidays by the three New Orleans rabbis illustrates this process. As a German immigrant, James K. Gutheim exhibited strong American sentiments. Born in 1817 in Westphalia, he immigrated to the United States in the early 1840s. He served Bene Yeshurun in Cincinnati from 1846 until he moved to New Orleans' Gates of Mercy in 1850. He remained there until 1853 when he became the rabbi of Dispersed of Judah, also located in New Orleans. After the Civil War, he returned to Gates of Mercy but soon left for Temple Emanu-El in New York in 1868. He returned to New Orleans in 1872 as the first rabbi of Temple Sinai where he served until his death in 1886.

Among his extant sermons are three that Gutheim preached on Thanksgiving in 1860, 1869, and 1870. In each he appealed to Jewish identity as Americans in order to overcome the religious boundaries between Jew and Christian. In the first he recognized that Thanksgiving originated with the "Pilgrim fathers" and had become a "sacred custom," but he understood the day to be a celebration "for the American people," and that Jews formed "an integral part of this body-politic [*sic*]." Jews, therefore, could claim

Rabbi James K. Gutheim.

*While in New Orleans, he served in various capacities
that brought him into contact with Christians.*

*He was an important member of the
New Orleans School Board from 1877 to 1882
and worked in several charitable organizations.
(Courtesy of Temple Sinai, New Orleans, Louisiana.)*

the founding fathers as their adopted fathers. Gutheim emphasized certain factors that bound together Jews with Americans of different creeds and nationalities, such as the mutual benefits received from liberty and the shared effects of national events. As a result, Jews had the duty to celebrate Thanksgiving with the rest of the nation. Unlike the situation in some other countries, Jews were allowed to participate in national celebrations. Gutheim could thus proclaim, "We are Israelites, but we are at the same time American citizens, in the purest and fullest sense of the word; our fate is bound up with that of our common country." Addressing the coming Civil War obliquely, the rabbi encouraged "every good citizen" to "exhibit a true and pure patriotism" by being ready to make all sacrifices for the right and just cause.¹² The religious boundary that existed between Jews and Christians, therefore, could be overcome by emphasizing their commonality as Americans. This commonality manifested itself apart from religious belief and would be demonstrated not only by the observance of Thanksgiving but also by participation in the imminent Civil War. In this case, shared experience superseded religion in developing American identity.

When New Orleans seceded from the Union, Gutheim continued to appeal to national identity, but, in this case, he meant Confederate identity. His actions on behalf of the Confederacy during the Civil War helped reduce religious barriers created by his Jewishness. Committed ardently to the cause of his nation (now defined as the Confederacy), he chose to leave federally occupied New Orleans in 1863 rather than sign an oath of allegiance to the United States.¹³ On May 8, 1863, Gutheim wrote his friend, Isaac Leiser, informing him of his decision to leave the city. Gutheim's reference to President Abraham Lincoln as the "Dictator of Washington" made clear where his sentiments lay. He spent the rest of the war in Montgomery, Alabama, serving two congregations as rabbi.¹⁴ While in Montgomery he delivered a prayer calling on God to bless the Confederacy in the just cause of "the defense of our liberties and rights and independence, under just and equitable laws." He characterized northerners as "those who have forced upon us this unholy and unnatural war—who hurl

against us their poisoned arrows steeped in ambition and revenge."¹⁵ These actions won him wide acclaim in the South during and after the war.

As committed as he was to the Confederate cause, Gutheim, however, quickly worked for reconciliation after the war. In 1869, while serving Temple Emanu-El in New York City, Gutheim echoed some of the same sentiments from his Thanksgiving sermon of 1860. Religious law, ceremony, or rite did not command the observance of Thanksgiving nor did it commemorate any Jewish national event. They celebrated this day as Americans, not as Jews. He lauded the peace that had come over the nation, pointing out that material prosperity and civil and religious liberty had brought about such conditions. The prerequisite for peace— independence— was being achieved through the material prosperity of the country. He extolled the American republican system of government since it secured the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. Such results sprang from civil and religious liberty. Yet, in spite of these fundamental principles, "some fanatic sectarians" (unidentified by Gutheim) had been attempting to engraft upon the United States Constitution certain religious tenets. These efforts threatened the blessings of civil and religious liberty, which were largely responsible for the prosperity of the nation. "Every good citizen" had the duty to insure freedom.¹⁶ Again, Gutheim had used American identity to combat religious barriers. By defining citizenship in terms of insuring religious liberty, he hoped to negotiate religious differences by appealing to the common American value of liberty. In his eyes, such a value was neither Jewish nor Christian and could be endorsed by all but the fanatical.

The following Thanksgiving Gutheim proclaimed, "All the differences of creed are this day merged into the one controlling sentiment, that the Almighty Creator of the universe is our Father and Protector, who causes the sun to shine and the earth to yield its fruits for the benefit of all His children." Again, he pointed to the material prosperity of the nation as evidence of God's blessing, but the greatest blessings came from the spiritual and moral realm and were ushered in through liberty and peace. Yet many

still suffered and were impoverished. Thanksgiving, therefore, called upon the materially blessed to share with those in need.¹⁷ In this sermon, Gutheim merged religious and national identities. Thanksgiving, an American holiday, brought together the varied expressions of religion under two common religious beliefs, divine fatherhood and protection of the nation. Essentially the national identity managed the religious by providing opportunity for religious unity through national unity. This allowed Jews to demonstrate their common interests with Christians by acknowledging God's blessing on members of all creeds and by then seeking to pass on the material blessings not as Jews or Christians, but as Americans.

In his 1870 Thanksgiving sermon, he had observed that "the wounds struck by civil strife are gradually healing. Sectional differences and animosities are fast disappearing under the benign spirit of forbearance and fraternal sympathy."¹⁸ Twelve years later he continued this theme in an address to the Southern Historical Society. He observed that the passions once dividing the nation were receding, and he foresaw the North and the South joining hands and forming a united republic. He then asked why a sectional institution such as the Southern Historical Society was necessary. Gutheim answered by recounting the biblical story of the two and a half Israelite tribes who, after helping the others conquer the Promised Land, decided to settle outside of the land on the east side of the Jordan River (Joshua 22). When the two and one-half tribes set up an altar, the remaining tribes took it as an act of unfaithfulness, threatened war, and demanded an explanation. The trans-Jordanian tribes explained that they had built the altar to remind future generations of their connection with the others. Gutheim then explained the mission of the Southern Historical Society as setting up a monument to the strength of the Union. He closed by asserting that the Civil War had obliterated the Mason-Dixon line and called for loyalty to the constitution, attachment to the Union, and zeal for establishing the fundamental rights of liberty. He was loudly applauded by the audience.¹⁹

These examples demonstrate Gutheim's use of both American and Confederate identity to navigate obstacles posed by his

Jewishness. To him, being an American depended more on one's support of civil and religious liberty than on adherence to a certain dogma. Such an identity was forged and expressed by sharing the fate of the nation and participating in national observances. As Americans, Jews and Christians shared the ravages of war and the blessings of prosperity. Both Jews and gentiles also shared the responsibility to participate in national events and to care for each other. By encouraging Jews to participate in Thanksgiving observances and to sacrifice for the good of the nation, Gutheim, therefore, advocated the active involvement of Jews in creating their American identity. Jews could not expect to live in isolation in the United States without sharing and participating in national events.

Like Gutheim, Rabbi Max Heller also used American identity to overcome barriers constructed by Christian notions of nationalism, but he also applied national identity to overcome barriers erected by Jewish notions. Born in Prague in 1860, Heller came to the United States in 1879. Ordained in 1884 he was a member of the second graduating class of Hebrew Union College. He then became the associate rabbi at Chicago's Zion Congregation. By 1887 he succeeded Gutheim at Temple Sinai. In a sermon given on January 1, 1897, Heller attempted to show how new circumstances often created the need for certain religious expressions, cast in temporary forms, to change. He argued that in the past ghetto life of the Jews, the gentiles had interposed religion as a barrier and a distinguishing factor. In the United States, however, this should not occur in the ordinary relations of life. Heller frankly and bluntly stated, "Jews shall assimilate." This, however, raised an important question concerning the Jewish Sabbath. Was the observance of it unpatriotic? He reasoned that it was not because Sunday had been made the civil day of rest on a humanitarian, rather than a theological, basis. America was not a Christian country. Otherwise, it would indeed be unpatriotic for Jews to observe their Sabbath as opposed to Sunday. Yet, in recognizing the need to assimilate, many Jews had become impatient with or indifferent to the Sabbath ceremony. Heller noted, "We dont [*sic*] know yet how to be loyal to [the] Jewish past without

offending."²⁰ In essence he had emphasized the dilemma facing American Jews. Living in a largely Christian environment, the Jewish Sabbath was not generally recognized by society. Instead, American society was structured around the Christian Sabbath while considering the Jewish Sabbath a day of work. Did being American mean that worship had to be conducted on Sunday while using Saturday as a day of work? By defining American identity in non-theological terms, Heller legitimated what he delineated as non-Christian practices of religion. In short, American identity did not depend on Christian identity. In fact, while he argued that religious barriers were at one time of gentile origin, America had sought to reduce such walls. Therefore, although religion indeed acted as a distinguishing agent, it should not bar Jews access to American society.

A few weeks later, three days before George Washington's birthday, Heller lectured on patriotism and took Washington's life as the focus of his comments. After asking, "Wherein does patriotism consist?", he answered that it consists "not in dying for one's country, but in living for it." He then showed how Washington, through hard work and thriftiness, overcame a childhood bereft of economic and educational advantages. Furthermore, the former president disdained partisanship in religion and politics.²¹

This last idea played an important role in Heller's thinking. By appealing to the example of George Washington, one of the great national icons, Heller attempted to overcome religious barriers to Jews living in a country with a Christian majority. By honoring Washington's birthday and life, Heller showed that being an American did not depend on one's religious affiliation. After all, Washington himself disdained distinctions based on one's religion. Instead, being an American meant rising above those things that divided the nation and working for the betterment of the country. Again, to the gentile, the message was that one's American identity did not depend on one's Christian identity.²² To his Jewish audience, Heller used Washington to encourage a simplicity of life, consistent idealism, and the fulfillment of responsibilities. Rabbi Leucht expressed similar sentiments in a prayer he wrote for the one hundredth

Rabbi Max Heller.

*While rabbi at Temple Sinai, he invited the
First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans
to use the synagogue's facilities while their building
was being refurbished. The church gladly accepted.
(Courtesy of Temple Sinai, New Orleans, Louisiana.)*

anniversary of the celebration of Washington's birthday. He too extolled Washington's attributes, praying that these would bind the nation together and lift it to accomplish the highest aim. He entreated God that prejudices and doubt would not guide humans but that all would look to God for light and truth.²³

The separating of one's religious beliefs from national identity also affected Jewish actions as Americans. Heller believed that Jews in general should not vote as a group when religion had nothing to do with an issue. In fact, to vote for a candidate based primarily on the candidate's like or dislike of the Jews was, in his words, narrow-minded and unpatriotic. Furthermore, to use hyphenated terms (such as German-American) to emphasize one's ethnicity harmed American society since it created divisions.²⁴ He, therefore, applied the separation of religion from American identity to Jews as well as Christians.

In addition to American history, Heller appropriated current events to oppose religious barriers. The United States had become involved in a war in Cuba and the Philippines toward the end of the nineteenth century. Amid concerns about the safety of American investments in Cuba, the United States went to war with Spain in 1898 in hopes of securing Cuban independence. In a brief war, the Americans defeated Spain and thus helped Cubans gain freedom and drove Spain from the Philippines. President William McKinley sought "to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them." These events provided the backdrop to a sermon delivered by Heller in January 1899.²⁵

In response to a recommendation from the Union of American Hebrew Congregations that Jews devote a Sabbath to remember those in the military, Heller addressed his congregation concerning the Spanish-American War. Linking Judaism with liberty, Heller affirmed the pride of Jews in those who had died fighting for their country. Concerning monuments to commemorate the fallen soldiers, he emphasized the Jewish nature of monuments by turning to Jacob's experience recorded in Genesis 28. After his famous dream of angels ascending and descending upon a ladder extending from heaven, Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow, set it up as a monument, and declared that "this

stone . . . shall be God's house." Heller observed that for a monument to become a house of God, it must commemorate a dream. He then concluded, "the spiritual & imperishable monument will be the liberty of Cuba & of the Philippines." In fact, he called this liberating action "a new flowering out of our traditions." By linking liberty with Judaism, he could conclude, "The U. S. [was] founded upon Jewish aspirations." As examples of this he cited the Puritans, the American Revolution, Abraham Lincoln, and the inspiration found in the biblical concept of the year of jubilee (probably a reference to the Liberty Bell, which was inscribed with a phrase from Leviticus 25:10).²⁶ Heller was not arguing that the country was a Jewish nation in the same manner that Christians often contended for the Christian nature of the United States. Since the late nineteenth century, Christianity and, more specifically, Protestantism had been linked increasingly with patriotism. Many Americans, especially Christian revivalists, felt the two were synonymous. To be anything other than a Christian, preferably a Protestant, was unpatriotic to many.²⁷ In a sense, Heller did an "end run" around this argument. Christians may have founded the nation, but the leading attribute of the United States—liberty—actually was a Jewish concept. While Rabbi Gutheim had considered liberty to be neither an exclusively Jewish or Christian value, Heller explicitly identified it as having Jewish roots.

What were the implications of such a view? Jews no longer would have to speak, as Gutheim had, of the founding fathers as their adopted fathers. The majority of the founding fathers may not have been Jewish literally, but they operated from a Jewish principle. Thus Judaism played a leading role in the founding of the nation in a spiritual sense. Furthermore, to support the spread of liberty to Cuba and the Philippines not only was an American ideal, it also was a Jewish ideal. Jews could cross any barrier imposed by religion and wholeheartedly support this national goal as Americans although President McKinley had identified the Christianizing of Filipinos as one objective of the war. Heller used religion to redefine or broaden American notions of identity to give Jews a significant part in the founding of the country. Like

Gutheim, Heller called for active participation by Jews in national events and in the creation of their American identity. He, however, went a step further in his appropriation of the concept of liberty. Liberty was indeed the quintessential expression of American identity. As a Jewish ideal, however, Americans had "borrowed" it. Jews were not merely "foreigners" living in the land. They were virtual founders of the nation.

Heller's redefinition of liberty and support of the Spanish-American War also reflected what Sidney E. Mead has called an amalgamation or syncretization of theology with American society. Accordingly, during the last half of the nineteenth century, the ideas and ideals of a democratic society with a "free-enterprise" system were generally accepted by Protestants. He explained that as "activistic American Protestants lost their sense of estrangement from the society, [they] began to argue that it (i.e., American society) was profoundly Christian, and to explain and vindicate it in a jargon strangely compounded out of the language of traditional Christian theology, the prevalent common-sense philosophy, and laissez-faire economics." Heller and other Jews confronted a society that was increasingly intertwined and identified with Protestant Christianity. Yet, through their efforts to redefine terms often understood in the context of Protestantism, Jews sought to fortify their status as Americans and to challenge Protestant notions.²⁸ This broadening of American identity nurtured cooperation between Jews and Christians of New Orleans in a variety of settings.

Jewish-Christian Unity

Palmer, Gutheim, Leucht, and Heller used religion to overcome barriers that might otherwise have inhibited intergroup dialogue. By doing so, they engaged in the redefinition of religious and national identities. Did, however, their words indicate what some scholars have called a "surface cordiality"? Did the actions of Gutheim, Leucht, and Heller represent protective measures designed to interpret Jewishness in manners acceptable to a gentile majority? Did Palmer join with Jews merely to advance Christian goals? While the role of southern rabbis has been

Rabbi Isaac L. Leucht.

Among his many activities, he served on the Louisiana State Board of Education, helped with the New Orleans B'nai B'rith relief efforts after the Galveston Hurricane of 1900, and was a member of the Red Cross Society.

(Courtesy Touro Infirmary Archives, New Orleans, Louisiana)

understood to be that of an interpreter or broker of Jewish values and culture to the gentiles,²⁹ Palmer also seemed to perform the same function on behalf of Christians. Furthermore, Gutheim, Leucht, and Heller transmitted images of Christians to their Jewish audiences. Palmer likewise transmitted Jewish images to Christians. All four sought to explain the other's faith within the framework of their respective religions.

Concerning the early religious environment of the United States, Sidney E. Mead has observed, "Because religious commitment is an all-or-nothing matter, each religious group tended to absolutize the particular tenets of its generally Christian theology and polity that distinguished it from all others. For in these its sense of peculiar and significant identity and its justification for separate existence were rooted." If this statement is true regarding the relationship between Christian denominations, it seems to be even more applicable regarding the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Mead argued further, "It is for this reason that every religious group tends to resist emphasis on the tenets it shares with all others." Accordingly, religious freedom caused each group to compete with the others for the uncommitted.³⁰ Mead's idea helps explain partially why Christian denominations maintained their distinctive doctrines; it was a matter of survival. Maintaining doctrinal distinctiveness paradoxically became all the more important as Jews and Christians in New Orleans began to find issues on which to unite. As the two groups began to explore ways of negotiating the traditional barriers between them, the respective assertions concerning the true or superior nature of their religions kept them from losing their distinctive identities.

All four ministers saw the value of maintaining religious particularism, and each, in fact, stressed the superiority of his denomination while recognizing the contributions of others. As previously noted, Palmer, like most Christians, believed that Christianity had superseded Judaism in God's plan as his instrument in the world. Thus in explaining why the central tenet of Christianity (the death and resurrection of Jesus) provoked Jewish opposition, he asserted that Jews did not disagree with Christians concerning the commonly shared doctrines of supernatural

revelation, mediation, redemption, sacrifice, atonement, and priesthood. Instead, "the trouble with the Jew is that all these are assumed by Christianity into itself, and thus Judaism is vacated; by which all his religious associations are offended, and he is led to reject the Cross." In simple terms, Christianity had assumed Judaism's earlier role.³¹

The belief in the superiority of one's religion, however, was not unique to Christians like Palmer. Gutheim manifested the same ideas, albeit applied to Judaism, and did not hesitate to chastise and confront Christianity. In 1849, for example, at the consecration of congregation Adath Israel of Louisville, Kentucky, he proclaimed the mission of Judaism "to be the bearer and guardian of the Revelation of God and of the Doctrine of the Unity of His Being for all times and to all nations."³² In his inaugural sermon at Temple Emanu-El in New York, given on November 14, 1868, he referred to Christian stereotypes by asking, "Has not, for the last 1,800 years, our truthful religion been decried as an exploded system, and our faithful adherence to it been styled blinded stubbornness?" He then argued for the necessity of recognizing truth, comparing the spiritually blind with the physically blind. One who has been born blind can never see the light of day. So, too, one who is spiritually blind cannot "appreciate properly and truly the mysterious workings of Providence" because his "mental eye is overclouded and darkened by superstition and irreligion." Thus the "preacher in Israel" must impart truth and dispel "the clouds of error and prejudice." The following week he contended that gentile interest in Judaism came more from curiosity rather than from true appreciation. He challenged his congregation to spread "enlightened religious views . . . for the triumph of truth, light and love, in this great Western World."³³ Gutheim, therefore, sought to overcome prejudice and misunderstanding by dispelling erroneous notions of Judaism. He also hinted at the inferiority of Christianity by emphasizing the spiritual blindness that it had produced.

Yet, Gutheim could be even more direct. The idea of Israel's mission arose often in his preaching. He used this concept to orient Jews to their role as a people scattered among the nations

and without a homeland. In an undated sermon on Numbers 4:14–20, he illustrated the relationship of the Jews to the world by comparing it to the relationship of the biblical tribe of Levi, and especially the priests, to the rest of the biblical Israelites. The tribe of Levi acted as the divinely chosen tribe to perform religious duties. In the same way, “the people of Israel, were selected by the Most High, to be the guardians and conservators of his word, the ministers of the human race, the priests in the sanctuary.” This mission explained why Israel had been dispersed throughout the world. Jews were to be a blessing to all humanity so that all people, including “those who imagine to preach the highest truths enveloped in irreconcilable mysteries and forced human dogmas,” clearly a reference to Christians, would one day “learn the true Knowledge of God from Israel.”³⁴ Gutheim utterly rejected the notion of Christianity as the divine bearer of truth to the world. To him Judaism had not become bankrupt by the advent of Christianity. If anything, Christianity was based on empty claims and biblical misunderstanding.

Gutheim explicated the complete lack of basis for Christian claims in a sermon he delivered on March 18, 1854. Using Exodus 32:30–33 as his text, he argued for the individual’s responsibility for sin. He warned against efforts to obtain divine pardon and grace by “false means.” Each person individually possessed the power to restore his or her relation with God. Twice in his sermon manuscript, Gutheim underlined the sentence, “The Bible sanctions no vicarious atonement, no expiation of sin by proxy.” He concluded his message by asserting that, “The idea of a vicarious atonement as being necessary to the salvation of mankind, of a nation or of a single individual is, therefore, in direct opposition to the letter and spirit of the Bible.”³⁵ By attacking the idea of vicarious atonement, Gutheim struck at the heart of Christianity. Without the doctrine of the vicarious atoning death of Jesus, Christianity would not exist. Therefore, like Palmer, Gutheim held strong beliefs regarding the superiority of his religion.

Max Heller, on the other hand, presented a more ambiguous position toward Christianity. This may be explained, in part, by his view of religious truth. To him, rather than being singular, the

latter exhibited a variety of manifestations (unlike Palmer's idea of truth progressing from Judaism to Christianity). As a result, Judaism could never claim infallibility or a monopoly of truth.³⁶ True tolerance, therefore, was to "thank [our] brother for differing, instead of forgiving him."³⁷ He counseled his congregation to be tolerant toward other religions. Anticipating the question whether or not tolerance meant unfaithfulness to "our truth," he answered negatively because "there is no absolute truth; true is to each what makes him noble."³⁸

With sentiments such as these, it would seem that Heller would hardly have a harsh word to say about other religions, especially Christianity. Yet, he did. Although he preached toleration, he also asserted that every religion answered a human need. What need did Judaism answer? To use Heller's words, it "suits most, fits highest intelligences, lifts them up & progresses with us."³⁹ He apparently conceived of Judaism to be among the highest of religions. While all religions had positive values and contained truth, most, if not all, fell short of Judaism. Heller cautioned against assuming that Judaism contained all truth, but he apparently believed it contained the most truth. Naturally rejecting Christianity's ultimate claims, he affirmed, "We can venerate the Christ-character, even though we cannot accept the Christ-faith; but even the latter we can honor and admire in others where it gives rise to childlike trust and elevated sentiment."⁴⁰ Admiration of Christian ideals, thus, did not prevent Heller from viewing it as inferior to Judaism.

Given Judaism's mission of living its faith in a world "brutally materialistic in its greed," Judaism was the antidote needed by everyone. Nonetheless the ideals and truths of Judaism had been preached by men "not of Israel's blood" and spread throughout the world with the use of the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament). To Heller, although these truths had been preached, they had not been lived. From this necessity he found a mission for Jews because out of all "history's great teacher-nations," Israel alone had survived so that it could embody these truths. Christianity had failed in this effort. Heller juxtaposed the influence of Jesus with the mission of the Jews:

That sweet personality of the Christian savior, with all its purity and all its impossibility, has affected but imperceptibly the military and imperialistic barbarism of our age; the world's Messiah must be a whole people which will bring peace to the individual, as it will teach righteousness to the nations.

Israel is the world's divinely appointed Messiah.

Christianity had good points, but it had essentially failed. The world needed Judaism, the true messianic vehicle, to live the Jewish truths that Christians had appropriated but not lived. This would best be accomplished through Zionism. Ironically, Heller saw the need for a physical nation to aid Jews in accomplishing their divine mission. This idea was not far removed from Christians' efforts to use the United States to further their ideals.⁴¹

Each of the four ministers, therefore, transmitted to their audiences similar pictures of the other's religion. The two religions were connected, but their counterpart had departed from the divine mission either through spiritual blindness or error. In spite of strongly-held beliefs that their respective religion was the superior and divinely chosen creed of the modern era, Jews and Christians in New Orleans found common ground on which to unite. Furthermore, these religious ideas were not impenetrable barriers prohibiting the two groups from joining hands on religious issues. To the contrary, religion often provided the forum for cooperation.

Palmer and other Christians could unite with the Jews of New Orleans to denounce the persecutions of Jews in Russia. At a rally held on March 16, 1882, Palmer, along with Percy Roberts, a local lawyer, the Rev. Father O'Connor (probably John F. O'Connor, assistant pastor of Jesuits' College and Church of the Immaculate Conception), and T. J. Semmes, also a local lawyer and former Confederate senator, spoke to a large crowd. According to the *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, this event attracted an unprecedented number of people. The mayor of New Orleans, Joseph A. Shakespeare, called the meeting to order and then called for the reading of a number of resolutions previously composed by a committee chaired by the Rev. Henry M. Smith, pastor of the

Third Presbyterian Church. Other notable local and state businessmen and politicians participated in various capacities. Members of the Jewish community served alongside Christians as vice presidents. Invoking humanity, justice, and Christianity, the resolutions denounced the treatment of Russian Jews, calling it unparalleled in modern history. They endorsed the policy of settling the refugees in agricultural colonies and the offer of Gov. Samuel D. McEnery to give homesteads to Russian Jews. The committee pointed to the Sicily Island agricultural colony for Russian Jews, located in Catahoula Parish, as a foreshadowing of future success. They encouraged the mayor to appoint a committee to receive and disburse contributions for the relief of Russian Jews. Finally, they requested Louisiana's congressional delegation in Washington to bring the city's sentiments before the president. All resolutions carried unanimously.⁴²

Following the approval of the resolutions, the four speakers addressed the crowd. Roberts spoke first, describing the Jewish race as "the most remarkable people" and "God elected," "God ordained," and "God producing." He emphasized the Jewish support of Christian victims of persecution, specifically referring to a speech given by Rabbi Gutheim in New Orleans in 1851. According to Roberts, twenty thousand Christians had been "inhumanly slaughtered in Syria by their Mohammedan enemies." In reply to his question, concerning who led in crying out against such atrocities and in gathering relief for the victims, Roberts had C. F. Buck, the city attorney, read an excerpt from Gutheim's address. The excerpt included letters written by Moses Montefiore and the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain encouraging Jewish support of the suffering Christians, and in Montefiore's case, including a one thousand dollar contribution for relief. Roberts then resumed his argument for aid by developing the idea of the Christians' debt to the Jews. He observed, "We owe them all that we hold highest and dearest of our possessions." Among these things, he included "our" law, code of morals, religion, and "on his human side, our very God himself."

Father O'Connor next highlighted factors that united Jew, Protestant, and Catholic on this occasion. Among them, he

pointed to the common sentiment of human sympathy in the face of persecution, the assault on everyone's inalienable right to peace, prosperity, and life, and the outrages against Christian principles in a Christian country. The priest labeled the persecution of Russian Jews as attacks on human rights, the spirit of Christianity, and civilization. Semmes then noted how the previous speakers had fully explored the Christian point of view regarding the issue at hand. He would address the crowd not as a Christian, but as an American citizen. As such, he protested the Russian persecutions because they violated the great American principle espousing the right of all to express their opinions. When he encouraged the audience to register their protests as Americans against the attack on the Jews, he was met with loud and long cheering.

Palmer rose as the final speaker of the evening. He advocated the cessation of Russian persecutions and the reception of Russian Jewish immigrants by the United States. He borrowed Semmes' idea of speaking as an American when he asserted that the voice of protest must come from American soil. In order to be true to "the great sentiment engraved upon the cornerstone of our civil government," namely the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Americans must protest and offer refuge to the oppressed. He then addressed the religious aspect of the matter. Reflecting on the biblical history and associations with the Jews, he referred to the fact that Christianity had derived from Judaism. The sacred books of the Jews were the sacred books of Christians. Due to this connection, which he had long espoused, he would support Jews whenever necessary. In Palmer's words,

Whenever persecution burst upon the Jew there would I be at his side—an Hebrew of the Hebrews—to suffer and to do. If we cannot stay the hand of persecution abroad, let us welcome them to our homes and our bosoms here, and roll up such a sentiment in favor of civil and religious freedom on this new continent that it shall never be darkened with the stain which rests upon the old.⁴³

After a long and loud applause, the meeting ended. Palmer's last words apparently struck a chord with some in the Jewish community, for at his death twenty years later, Rabbi Leucht paraphrased Palmer at his memorial service, "When a Hebrew suffers, I suffer with him . . . these words since then have been the bonds that linked us to him—even unto death."⁴⁴ Jews like Leucht regarded Palmer's statements as concrete evidence of his support of Jews and not as mere rhetoric.

All four speakers emphasized different connections with Jews. Percy Roberts highlighted the idea of Christian indebtedness to the Jews. Father O'Connor pointed to the Christian responsibility to respond to suffering. T. J. Semmes moved away from the religious aspects of the meeting and addressed an American reaction, and Palmer combined the religious and American responses. His speech accentuated how these two great influences, national and religious (in this case, Christian) ideals, worked simultaneously to overcome barriers that both, taken in isolation, often constructed. In terms of religion, Jews and Christians disagreed deeply over the nature of God and his work in the world, and their theological claims often contradicted one another. If one's American identity depended on one's Christian identity, then Jews and Christians could never be united as fellow citizens. In this case, American ideals of liberty helped overcome religious barriers by associating religious liberty with American identity. Being an American meant, at least theoretically, looking past distinctions raised by religion. In other words, Palmer's status as an American helped keep his claims of Christian superiority in check. This idea differed dramatically from other forms of American identity present since at least the 1870s. Evangelicalism, such as that represented by Dwight L. Moody and the home missionary movement, often equated Americanization with evangelization.⁴⁵ On the other hand, religious identity also enabled Jews and Christians to find common ground. Christians in New Orleans protested the Jewish persecution precisely because they were linked to Jews based on religion.

The Jewish response to the mass meeting revealed several points of contact with the Christian expressions of support. Rabbi

Gutheim addressed his congregation at Temple Sinai on Saturday, the day after the mass meeting. Many gentiles attended the service, as well as a large number of Jews. Gutheim predicted that the outpouring of Christian support on behalf of the Jews would not be forgotten; "it was an era in the life of the Jewish people, and an event that time should not be able to efface." Furthermore, he hoped that "by our acts and liberality [we can] show that we are all of one blood." (This portrayal differed from Heller's later assertion that Christians were "not of Israel's blood.") The ideas of indebtedness and shared values had again arisen.⁴⁶

Gutheim also addressed the source of the persecutions. He attributed it to "bigoted religionists" who sought "to force upon the world their peculiar tenets, and would gladly compel all men to follow their leaders." While in antiquity, nations worshipped their own gods and asserted their superiority, "now all nations recognize that there is only one true God." The Russian persecutions reflected a retrogression to the ancient days of polytheism. According to Gutheim, however, "our scriptures" encouraged a different response to religious pluralism, namely, "that we should love our neighbors as ourselves." He defined this idea as respect for the views and opinions of other citizens. The rabbi remarked, "Obedience to this divine principle does not necessitate an abandoning of our faith, not at all, but that we shall recognize the rights of the stranger."⁴⁷

Gutheim's appropriation of the "love thy neighbor as thyself" principle must have struck a chord with Christians. This principle occurred in Leviticus 19:18, but according to Matthew 22:34-40, Jesus used it to help define the essence of the Law and the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible. According to the Matthew account, a Pharisee asked Jesus which commandment was the greatest. Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 which enjoined complete devotion to God. He also said that the second commandment was similar to the first; "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Christians undoubtedly knew this episode well because it represented a bare-bones expression of the foundational principles of their religion. When Gutheim identified this

ideal as Jewish, Christians certainly noticed the connections between the two religions. Gutheim had subtly shown that the agreement of Judaism and Christianity on two major core values could lead to cooperative action in the national arena. By defining love of one's neighbor in terms of respect for his or her views and opinions, Gutheim wedded religious ideas with civil liberty. Thus, the religious found expression in the civil by granting religious liberty. In essence when Jews and Christians practiced religious liberty, they were practicing a fundamental principle of their respective faiths and were not being unfaithful to their respective religions.

Rabbi Leucht also addressed his congregation at Touro Synagogue regarding the mass meeting. Leucht had been born in Darmstadt and immigrated to the United States in 1864. He served as the assistant rabbi to Rabbi Henry Hocheimer at the Fell's Point congregation in Baltimore before becoming Gutheim's assistant in 1868, first at Gates of Mercy and later at Temple Sinai. In 1879 he became the rabbi of Gates of Mercy, which merged with Dispersed of Judah in 1882 to form Touro Synagogue. In response to the mass meeting, Leucht chose to address his newly reconstituted congregation on the issue of Jews and agriculture. Pointing out that in antiquity Israel had been composed of agriculturists, Leucht contended that hundreds of years of persecution had forced Jews to switch to mercantile pursuits. He agreed that far too many Jews were working as merchants, and he encouraged Jewish parents to teach their children other trades, "and prove to the world we are willing to definitely solve the Jewish question." To Leucht, Jews bore the primary responsibility for ridding their gentile neighbors of prejudice against them. In this context he viewed the mass meeting as a symbol of the willingness of gentiles to assist Jews in this endeavor. He also understood it to be a sign that God would never forsake Israel. In reference to Palmer's address, Leucht said, "When that great and eloquent divine, with tears in his voice proclaimed, 'Whenever a Hebrew suffers I suffer with him,' it was to me as if that God who proclaimed himself to be the Father of all mankind had spoken with his eloquent tongue."⁴⁸

Leucht's response reveals two aspects of the issue. First, Jews were not passive spectators watching Christians fight their battles for them. Leucht interpreted Christian efforts at the mass meeting as welcome assistance, but he placed the primary responsibility for resolving their plight at the feet of the Jewish people. Indeed the Jews of New Orleans had worked previously for the relief of Jews in Russia. Russian Jews had settled Sicily Island in 1881, the first Jewish agricultural colony in the United States. The New Orleans Agricultural Society lent assistance to this endeavor. The New Orleans Immigrant Aid Association also raised funds to assist the Russian Jews. Jews in Elizabethgrad wrote a letter to the society on March 10, thanking the association for its assistance. Unfortunately, the assistance proved inadequate. Located in a swamp some distance from New Orleans, the Sicily Island affair failed in less than a year.⁴⁹ In fact, while the mass meeting was going on, the Jews at Sicily Island were struggling with a devastating flood that eventually doomed their colony. Yet, the whole movement represented active participation on the part of Jews to address the suffering of Russian Jews. Second, Christian assistance arose from their common association with Jews in the realm of religion. Palmer had identified religious connections as the tie binding Jews and Christians together. Leucht affirmed it by acknowledging the act of the "Father of all mankind" in the words and actions of Palmer and others. Once again, religious identity allowed Jews and Christians to unite.

This identity expressed itself again a few weeks after the mass meeting. On March 27 many ministers of the city came together to explore the possibility of creating a league dedicated to the better observance of the Sabbath. Palmer played a leading role in convening the meeting. Sabbath movements were not uncommon in the United States and also internationally. In the 1820s and 1830s, the Christian Sabbatarian movement began in the United States as part of a social and religious reform effort. These efforts contributed to the creation of a six-day work week.⁵⁰ The New Orleans movement also identified religious, as well as social, reasons for agitating for the better observance of the Sabbath.

Palmer called the meeting to order and nominated Methodist Bishop J. C. Keener as president of the fledgling organization. After his election, the bishop remarked that Louisiana was the only state without a Sunday law, noting the failure of previous efforts to pass such an act. He indicated that an indirect impetus for the present meeting may have arisen after the United States Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a local option Sabbath law that had been adopted by several parishes. He expressed confidence that the next legislature would deal with the constitutional objections if pressed by public opinion.⁵¹

After electing the Rev. J. W. Flinn, pastor of Memorial Presbyterian Church, as secretary, the conference next heard an address by Palmer. In an effort to show the broad appeal of the movement, he read a note from the Roman Catholic Archbishop, J. N. Perche, expressing regret over his being unable to attend. Palmer noted that he had conferred with Gutheim about the meeting and that the rabbi was present. Palmer, therefore, demonstrated that the major religious groups of New Orleans—Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish—had declared their interest in the Sabbath observance movement.⁵² Palmer's inclusion of Judaism marked an important step in the recognition of Judaism by Christians as a legitimate religious expression.

Palmer hoped that consensus would arise from agreement on three broad principles. The first justified the movement's existence based on the desecration of the Sabbath. Not only did ministers want to see the desecration halted, but so did "men of the world." The second asserted that the Sabbath belonged to God. Due to the divine ownership of this day, it ought to be spent in worship, rest from work, and absence of worry. Palmer, however, acknowledged that in order to impress upon all people the need for Sabbath observance, not only would all the ministers need to address the issue from their pulpits, but the publicity from newspapers and journals would be necessary. The latter would help reach the non-religious segment of New Orleanian society. Lastly, he indicated that God had given the Sabbath to man. By affirming these three principles, Palmer believed that a platform broad enough for all shades of belief could be fashioned. He did

express concern over the issue of the relationship between the church and state. While believing that individuals could address the legislature concerning these issues, he expressed reticence over organized religious bodies doing so. He believed it best to leave out of the movement's platform any reference to organized legislative action. Although Palmer did not want to establish a Sabbath observance league that would lobby the Louisiana legislature, he hoped that the league would influence public opinion.⁵³

After several other speakers expressed their opinions, Gutheim addressed the meeting. He began by saying that his presence might be "out of place," but Keener responded, "Not at all. We are glad to have you with us." According to the newspaper account, many others in the audience added, "We are glad to see you here." The rabbi affirmed the necessity and value of keeping the Sabbath to any religion. He cautioned, however, against relying on legislative action to further the cause of Sabbath observance. Instead, he encouraged the use of moral persuasion, noting that in his thirty-two years of residence in New Orleans, he had seen a gradual improvement in Sabbath observance. He concluded by stating that his "peculiar situation" prohibited him from voting on the resolutions. Others concurred with Gutheim's warning. In the end, Palmer's three resolutions were adopted unanimously, and the meeting adjourned until the next week.⁵⁴

On March 31 Rabbi Leucht delivered a sermon to his congregation in support of the aims of the Sabbath Observance League. From his point of view, anything that raised the moral sentiment of the community as well as alleviated the burden on the poorer classes and freed them from "the bondage of their taskmasters" warranted discussion. Freedom and liberty played integral roles in Leucht's interpretation of the Sabbath. Extrapolating from the fourth commandment's historical context (Exodus 20:8-11), he argued that it served to show the recently freed Israelites that they indeed were free and now could choose to work, rather than be forced to do so.⁵⁵

From the historical, Leucht proceeded to cultivate the Sabbath's value to modern society. The underlying principle of Sabbath celebration was the "moral elevation of man through

physical rest." Thus the Sabbath brought a great moral influence upon the Jews and was even responsible for the survival of the Jewish race. He reminded his congregation that the Sabbath they observed on foreign shores had not accompanied them to the United States. He attributed this primarily to the fact that "in the chase after gain we have had no time for its blessed comforts." Leucht, therefore, recognized the deleterious effects of materialism upon his congregation.⁵⁶

Both Jew and Christian shared in the threat of materialism on moral and spiritual sensitivities of people. As a result, Leucht could proclaim, "I believe a better observance of Sunday by the Christian community will have the effect of inducing you to hallow and reverence your own Sabbath." In fact, he considered it the "sacred duty" of Jews to assist in the "noble undertaking" of the league. How could this be done? Governmental enforcement clearly was not a viable option. He reasoned that the religious denomination in the majority in the legislature would dictate how the Sabbath would be observed. Invariably, religious hatred and jealousy would take over and even threaten the survival of the republic. Furthermore, he found unacceptable the proposal that Jews should be allowed to close their businesses on Saturday and reopen them on Sunday. Jews did not want laws enacted, either positively or negatively, on their behalf based on their status as Jews. According to Leucht, "We are—and must be in the eyes of the law—nothing but citizens of the United States, with equal burdens and equal rights." For Leucht, a Sunday law dictating how the Sabbath should be observed was unacceptable and a violation of individual freedom. On the other hand, he would support a law declaring that no one could be forced to work on the Sabbath.⁵⁷

Both Leucht and Gutheim agreed that people would best be incited to a better observance of the Sabbath only by appealing to morality and humanity. Leucht strongly urged members of his congregation to join the league, and he closed his sermon with one final appeal. By joining the league, "we will be able to repay that noble band of men who so eloquently and heartfully stood by the Jew when he was in want of sympathy, when persecuted by his

adversaries." In doing so they would exemplify the words found in Malachi 2:10: "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why, then, should we deal treacherously, one against the other, to profane the covenant of our Father?" These closing words of Leucht are most interesting because they reveal a sense of debt on the part of some Jews toward Christians. Undoubtedly Leucht was referring to the efforts of the people of New Orleans, led by Christian ministers, to support the Russian Jews at the mass meeting held earlier in the month. Jews and Christians felt a strong sense of debt springing from actions motivated by religion. This joint indebtedness helped them overcome the exclusive claims of their respective religions. His use of Malachi 2:10 also is interesting. In its biblical context, these words addressed the faithlessness of Jews living in the post-exilic (post 539 B.C.E.) community of Judah to the covenant as demonstrated by their intermarriage with gentiles. Leucht now used this verse to illustrate the brotherhood of Jew and gentile.⁵⁸

The Sabbath Observance League exemplified several aspects of Jewish-Christian relations. First, it showed the ability of Jews and Christians to unite voluntarily on religious issues. Sabbath observance was an integral part of both faiths, and both suffered from a general neglect of it by the populace. By joining forces they hoped to achieve mutual benefit. The league also demonstrated the ability of Jews to exert influence on Christians. Gutheim and Leucht helped persuade the league not to seek legislative action in order to achieve its goal. The effort by Christians to include Jews in the league further showed the growing importance of Jews to the religious community. Finally, the league represented the continuing dialogue about the meaning of religious liberty. Jewish opposition to Sabbath laws potentially put them in a dangerous situation. Besides the financial burden they would have to bear by not conducting business on Saturdays and Sundays, their patriotism might also be questioned. In 1885 the Rev. Wilbur F. Crafts wrote *The Sabbath for Man*, a book wherein he detailed the history of Sabbath observance. He supported Sabbath (Sunday) laws in the United States in light of the many benefits of such observance. He also linked it to the preservation of American society. Those

who opposed Sunday laws, therefore, threatened the very existence of the United States. Linking Sabbath observance to the founding of the country and noting that "Christianity is interwoven with the entire structure and history of the American government," Crafts questioned the patriotism of any who would oppose laws enforcing a quiet observance of the Christian Sabbath. He further argued that this opposition was based on false ideas of liberty, and he concluded that, "The first thing that emigrants of the baser sort need to learn on arrival in America is that American liberty includes obedience to the laws which protect the rights and liberties of all." Distinguishing between the "better class of Jews" and the "baser sort," Crafts believed that the latter needed to "take the scales of personal selfishness from their eyes" and rejoice in the benefits obtained by Sunday laws. The opposition voiced by Gutheim and Leucht to Sunday laws combined with their support of a Sabbath observance league challenged notions of Christian patriotism and liberty such as that expressed by Crafts. Remarkably, although the Sabbath Observance League was dominated by Christians, it refrained from pursuing the passage of Sunday laws. This was due, at least partially, to the efforts of Gutheim and Leucht. More importantly, the league's restraint in seeking legislation reflected more Jewish than typical Christian notions of liberty. Jewish presence and activity, therefore, helped broaden Christian concepts of religious liberty and American identity.⁵⁹

William G. McLoughlin Jr. has noted that from 1875 to 1915 several forces caused a reconstruction of American life. One of those factors was the massive influx of immigrants with different cultural and religious values. This migration caused a redefinition of many of the traditions of American life.⁶⁰ Similarly, the prominent presence of Jews among Christians in New Orleans forced the latter to reconceptualize their ideas of religious liberty. Some Christians began to grasp that religious liberty did not simply mean the freedom of Christian expressions of religion. It also included non-Christian expressions. Christians' understanding of American identity, so steeped in the idea of freedom, slowly began to expand beyond the criterion of adherence to Christian

dogma. Nineteenth century Christians, and especially Protestants, often tried to “Christianize” American culture to ensure that their values would prevail.⁶¹ The inclusion of Jews in the Sabbath League represented at least a small change in Christians’ views of religious liberty. While they still attempted to “Christianize” society, they now included Jews in the efforts to change society through Sabbath observance.

One final area in which the Jews and Christians of New Orleans united arose from the confrontation with common enemies. Historian Bobbie Malone has aptly described Palmer as Heller’s mentor.⁶² Both believed strongly in the supremacy of their respective faiths, yet they could work together on such issues as the Louisiana anti-lottery campaign as well as threats to religious awareness like materialism and pragmatism.

In 1892 electors had to decide whether to renew the charter of the Louisiana State Lottery. The daily, monthly, and semi-annual lottery drawings brought in large amounts of revenue for the state. While the lottery wielded great political and monetary power, citizens of Louisiana divided bitterly over the issue. The anti-lottery campaigners had been working in earnest for the past two years to defeat the charter renewal. The lottery, however, presented a formidable opponent, especially since the 1880s had been its most prosperous decade. Heller and Palmer played prominent roles in the opposition movement, as did Episcopal Bishop David Sessums, Catholic Archbishop Francis Janssens, and the Rev. Beverly Carradine, pastor of the Carondelet Street Methodist Church. According to one historian, Palmer delivered “the most stirring oratory in the antilottery campaign” at a rally held in New Orleans’ Grand Opera House on June 25, 1891.⁶³ Heller also delivered an influential speech on August 13, 1891, in Shreveport that helped in the eventual overwhelming rejection of the lottery amendment by the voters, although many in his congregation, including the congregation’s president, opposed Heller on this issue.⁶⁴

The lottery represented to Palmer and Heller the encroachment of materialism and greed on society. This loomed as a serious threat to both religions. Rather than view each other

as enemies, Jews and Christians found allies in one another as they confronted mutual threats. Heller noted as much in "The Cowardice of Prosperity," a sermon given either in 1897 or 1898. He described the current generation as being one of "boundless wealth, inexhaustible opportunity and well-nigh riotous freedom; an age whose children are born to an intoxicating heritage of enjoyment and privilege." Consequently, "the sterner notes of religious duty are laughed into the wind" and "drowned out in spiritual chaos." This situation, however, was not confined to Judaism for even "the most orthodox and rigid of Christian denominations" complained "that prayer and worship are losing their hold upon the people, that the sermon becomes emasculated, a mere feature of attraction and entertainment."⁶⁵ Thus, some Jews and Christians formed alliances in their efforts to maintain their religions in the face of an encroaching materialism. Religion acted as a catalyst, rather than an obstacle, in bringing Jews and Christians together.

These actions by the four ministers seem to indicate genuine attempts to cross boundaries. The relationship of Jews and Christians in New Orleans as represented by Benjamin Morgan Palmer, James K. Gutheim, Isaac L. Leucht, and Max Heller reveals different notions of American and religious identity. While barriers erected on the basis of ethnic or religious associations existed, gateways were cut into the barriers, thereby allowing access between the two groups. At times, religion worked as a conduit through ethnic barriers, while at other times national and regional associations allowed religious boundaries to be negotiated. Ultimately these gateways allowed each group to maintain distinctive identities while forging a relationship that proved beneficial to both. Perhaps Rabbi Leucht summarized best the relationship between Jews and Christians in New Orleans as he closed his eulogy at Palmer's memorial service in 1902.

At the sacred shrine of his memory let me say that I believe that it is eminently due to the life and influence of Dr. Palmer that a

deep, religious peace reigns supreme in our midst. Thank God, we live in a community wherein all public endeavors, in all that tends toward the good of our people, we know of no separating walls. We never ask our neighbor: "What dost thou believe? But, what art thou willing to do for the best interests of our Commonwealth? We take each other by the hand, exclaiming: 'Let there be no strife between me and thee,' and together we help to build on that great structure where in time to come will be sung a hallelujah by a united mankind.⁶⁶

Two years later Leucht stated in a newspaper article detailing the celebration of his sixtieth birthday and his twenty-fifth year as rabbi at Touro, "I am a Jew, and yet am a Protestant and also a Catholic, for I always protest against anything that opposes light and progress, and I am universal in my belief in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man."⁶⁷ Leucht was not unaware of the theological and social issues dividing Jews and Christians, but he had identified how the two groups had forged a working relationship. They had emphasized mutual interests, springing from both religious and nationalistic sources, that bound them together. They had indeed become cooperating communities of faith even in the midst of anti-Semitism. In their working together, the leaders of these two communities redefined their identities as Jews, Christians, and Americans.

Jewish ideas of American identity included religious freedom as well as the duty of all Jews to participate in national observances and events. American identity had no room for distinctions based on religion. For Christians like Palmer, American identity was bound up with Christianity, but his understanding of Christianity allowed Jews to play an important role in God's efforts to establish Christianity and later, the United States. He even left the possibility open for Jews being used again in God's plan.⁶⁸ For Palmer and others like him, however, American identity moved away from Christian identity. For both groups, American liberty did not mean the absence of claims of religious superiority. Jews and Christians maintained belief in the supremacy of their respective religions, but they could cooperate

on many national and religious issues either as Americans or as people of God.

NOTES

¹ A version of this paper was read at the annual meeting of the Southern Jewish Historical Society held in Richmond, Virginia on November 5–7, 1999.

² *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, June 15, 1886.

³ *Ibid.*, May 31, 1902.

⁴ *In Memory of Rev. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, D. D.*, n. d., 17; also see Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin M. Palmer* (Richmond, 1906; reprint, Great Britain, 1987), 645–650 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁵ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York, 1994), 13–14, 246; Leonard Rogoff, “Is the Jew White? The Racial Place of the Southern Jew,” *American Jewish History* 85 (September 1997): 195; Bobbie Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860–1929* (Tuscaloosa, 1997), 37.

⁶ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, “Import of Hebrew History,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 9 (April 1856): 591, 608.

⁷ Palmer, “Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 1 (December 1847): 40.

⁸ Palmer, “Import of Hebrew History,” 590.

⁹ As an example of Palmer’s attitude toward the Roman Catholic Church, his statement in “Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews,” (p. 53) is helpful. In commenting on the negative effect that rabbinical studies had on the Hebrew mind, Palmer said, “The dialectics of the Talmudists produced a race of sophists precisely similar to those whom the dialectics of the schoolmen produced in the Romish Church.”

¹⁰ Palmer, “Import of Hebrew History,” 598–601, 610.

¹¹ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The Address of Rev. B. M. Palmer Delivered on the First Day of the New Year and Century*, January 1, 1900, 6, 10–11.

¹² James K. Gutheim sermon, November 29, 1860, James K. Gutheim Papers, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio (hereafter cited as Gutheim Papers).

¹³ William Warren Rogers Jr., “‘In Defense of Our Sacred Cause’: Rabbi James K. Gutheim in Confederate Montgomery,” *Journal of Confederate History* 7 (1991): 115.

¹⁴ Bertram W. Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Philadelphia, 1951), 47–51.

¹⁵ Small collections, SC-4414, Miscellaneous, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

¹⁶ Gutheim sermon, November 18, 1869, Gutheim Papers.

¹⁷ Gutheim sermon, November 24, 1870, Gutheim Papers.

¹⁸ Gutheim sermon, November 24, 1870, Gutheim Papers.

¹⁹ James K. Gutheim, “Addresses of Rev. J. K. Gutheim and Rev. Dr. Palmer, at the Great Meeting in New Orleans,” *Southern Historical Society Papers* 10 (June 1882): 250. Palmer spoke at the same meeting and used much of his time to rebut the idea of the Lost Cause.

²⁰ Max Heller sermon, January 1, 1897, Friday Lectures 1896–1897, Box 9, folder 1, Max Heller Papers, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio (hereafter cited as Heller Papers). The vast majority of the extant Heller sermons are sermon notes rather than manuscripts. Often only words or phrases are written, making it difficult on occasion to determine what Heller meant.

²¹ Heller sermon, February 19, 1897, Friday Lectures 1896–1897, Box 9, folder 1, Heller Papers. In earlier sermon notes, Heller stated that Washington “deprecated partisanship.” Later Heller gave the following note from which I extrapolate his argument for Washington’s avoidance of partisanship: “Above part in religion & politics.”

²² See also Heller sermon, March 30, 1894, Friday Lectures 1893–1894, Box 9, folder 1, Heller Papers. In this sermon, Heller argued that it was un-American to put religious beliefs into the Constitution.

²³ Box 2, folder 1, Rabbi Isaac L. Leucht Papers, Manuscript Collection 853, Manuscript Department, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

²⁴ Max Heller, *Jewish Ledger*, May 8, 1896; Heller sermon, May 17, 1895, Friday Lectures 1894–1895, Box 9, folder 1, Heller Papers.

²⁵ John Mack Faragher, Mari Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom, and Susan H. Armitage, *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, 2d ed. (New Jersey, 1997), 640–641; President McKinley quoted in Samuel Flag Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States* (New York, 1955), 472.

²⁶ Heller sermon, January 27, 1899, Friday Lectures 1898–1899, Box 9, folder 2, Heller Papers; David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York, 1989), 595–597. Leviticus 25:10 addresses the year of Jubilee wherein those who had been enslaved due to debt were freed and land sold for pressing economic reasons was restored. Inscribed on the Liberty Bell was the phrase, “Proclaim Liberty throughout all the Land unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

²⁷ William G. McLoughlin Jr., *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York, 1959), 444–445.

²⁸ Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York, 1963), 138–139. Jon Butler has noted that between 1790 and 1860, Christianity in America changed from its colonial state-church pattern. As traditional church-state relations declined, the concern shifted from the relationship of government to the church to the relationship of the government to religion. While the post-revolutionary governments tended to support Christianity in general, the state’s authority in religious matters declined and denominational authority increased. As denominations proliferated, some Christians wanted governmental recognition of America’s Christian and Protestant identity. In response to indifference by some and to religious pluralism introduced by immigration, some Christians in the 1850s “evolved a myth of the American Christian past.” This myth “pressed new historical ‘facts’ on antebellum America as moral obligations.” See Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 257–264, 284–286 (quote).

²⁹ Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 177, 180; Malcolm H. Stern observed that, “A prime function of the Southern rabbi became interpreting the Jew to the non-Jewish community.” See Stern, “The Role of the Rabbi in the South,” in “*Turn to the South*”: *Essays on Southern Jewry*, ed. Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky (Charlottesville, 1979), 27; Mark K. Bauman and Arnold Shankman, “The Rabbi as Ethnic

Broker: The Case of David Marx," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 2 (Spring 1983): 51-54.

³⁰ Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York, 1975), 37-38.

³¹ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "Offence of the Cross, Unreasonable," in *A Weekly Publication Containing Sermons by Rev. B. M. Palmer* (New Orleans: November 19, 1876), 83. The text of this sermon came from 1 Corinthians 1:23: "But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness."

³² James K. Gutheim, *Sermon Delivered at the Consecration of the Synagogue Adas Israel, at Louisville, KY, March 30, 1849*, 4. See also his sermon of December 1, 1853, where he defined Israel's peculiar destiny as, "Israel should be the people of religion among the nations of the earth." Gutheim Papers.

³³ Gutheim, *The Temple Pulpit* (New York: 1879), 19-20, 35.

³⁴ Gutheim undated sermon on Numbers 4:14-20, Gutheim Papers.

³⁵ Gutheim sermon, March 18, 1854, Gutheim Papers.

³⁶ Heller sermon, April 24, 1891, Friday Lectures 1890-1891, Box 9, folder 1, Heller Papers.

³⁷ Heller sermon, November 23, 1888, Friday Lectures 1887-1888, Box 9, folder 1, Heller Papers.

³⁸ Heller sermon, May 26, 1893, Friday Lectures 1893, Box 9, folder 1, Heller Papers.

³⁹ Heller sermon, March 25, 1887, Friday Lectures 1887-1888, Box 9, folder 1, Heller Papers.

⁴⁰ Heller, *Jewish Ledger*, January 3, 1896.

⁴¹ Heller, *The American Hebrew*, May 8, 1903, 827-828. Gutheim would have agreed with this assessment. In a sermon preached in 1870, he proclaimed, "Israel, by its steady adhesion to this truth [humanity's creation in the image of God], has thus become the Messiah, the redeemer of mankind." He went on to show the superiority of Judaism to Islam and Christianity. The latter two religions sought conversions through force and brutality, but Judaism, the bearer of genuine religious truth, appealed to reason and waited patiently for the ultimate triumph of its cause. Gutheim, sermon dated 1870, "The episode recorded here . . ." Gutheim Papers.

⁴² Unless otherwise noted, the account of the mass meeting comes from the *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, March 17, 1882.

⁴³ A portion of Palmer's speech can also be found in Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin M. Palmer*, 487-490.

⁴⁴ *In Memory of Rev. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, D. D.*, 20.

⁴⁵ McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 267.

⁴⁶ *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, March 18, 1882.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Southwestern Presbyterian*, March 23, 1882.

⁴⁹ Pearl W. Bartelt, "American Jewish Agricultural Colonies," in *America's Communal Utopias*, ed. Donald E. Pitzer (Chapel Hill: 1997), 358; *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, April 23 and May 21, 1882.

⁵⁰ Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, "The Jewish Sabbath Movement in the Early Twentieth Century," *American Jewish History* 69 (December 1979): 196-197.

⁵¹ *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, March 28, 1882; *Southwestern Presbyterian*, March 30, 1882.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, April 3, 1882; *Southwestern Presbyterian*, April 6, 1882.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Wilbur F. Crafts, *The Sabbath for Man* (New York, 1885), 193, 251, 255–261.

⁶⁰ McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 168.

⁶¹ Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, *The Re-Forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism* (Louisville, 1992), 37–38.

⁶² Malone, *Max Heller*, 50, 69.

⁶³ Joy J. Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and Urban Progress, 1880–1896* (Baton Rouge, 1969), 115, 121, 129.

⁶⁴ Malone, *Max Heller*, 54.

⁶⁵ Max Heller, “The Cowardice of Prosperity,” Friday Lectures 1897–1898, Box 9, folder 1, Heller Papers.

⁶⁶ *In Memory of Rev. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, D. D.*, 21.

⁶⁷ *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, January 24, 1904.

⁶⁸ Palmer, “Narrative of a Mission,” 54.