



# History and the Future of Our Past

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Can history unravel the future of our past? In a modest way, yes. Contextualizing the changes occurring in our midst provides perspective, while illuminating the times that brought us here helps avoid misusing the past to support dubious and dangerous visions of the future.

But before we begin, a caveat of sorts. Let's skip the doleful aphorisms about the dangers of ignoring history. They're familiar enough: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (George Santayana); "Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it" (Winston Churchill); Edmund Burke's original (or so it would seem): "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it."

Philosophers and politicians such as Santayana, Burke, and Churchill seem taken by these pronouncements. However, few historians speak like this, whether in popular histories or scholarly monographs. Three reasons suffice. First, the distinctive features we associate with this decade or that century, such as economic strategies, religious disputes, and political maneuverings, seldom actually repeat themselves in any meaningful way. Those of the fourteenth century weren't those of the thirteenth, and our twentieth-century difficulties already aren't those of the twenty-first. Second, while the grandiosity of the warnings elevates their urgency, they're really just high-sounding platitudes that also leave readers bereft of useful

*Our histories are important, but learning from our histories is complex. Despite the aphorisms, there is such a multiplicity of materials about our past that can in ways obscure the central questions of the present and future, especially the core questions of religious meaning and faith that are central to humans of every age.*

instructions. From what past should we learn? All of history? Some of it? Third, their grandiosity obscures the fact that we're learning from history all the time. What society or enterprise hasn't tried to figure out what went wrong in this project or that development so it won't go wrong again? We don't need unctuous warnings from Santayana, Churchill, or Burke to urge us on.

So, coming down a notch, let's ask what the past can tell us about the starkest issue facing so many American clergy, congregations, and denominations: shrinking membership and rising numbers of "nones" who say they have no religious commitments or beliefs. Are these patterns real? Do they seem persistent? Do they represent major departures from the American past?

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Polling data and denominational records provide reinforcing evidence about post-2000 American religious membership patterns. The Gallup Poll has asked respondents about religious membership since 1937. For almost sixty years roughly 70 percent of Gallup respondents said they belonged to one or another religious group. That figure began falling in the late 1990s. It dropped to 64 percent by 2003, then 61 percent (2009), 55 percent (2014), and 50 percent by 2018. When the figure fell to 47 percent in 2021, *Gallup News* headlined, "U.S. Church Membership Falls below Majority for First Time."<sup>1</sup>

The losses were not equal among religious groups and ages. Theologically and politically conservative Protestants experienced relatively small declines while mainstream Protestant membership fell substantially. Although 66 percent of older respondents born before 1946 still reported membership in a church, synagogue, or mosque, that was down from 77 percent in 2000. More ominously, scarcely 36 percent of "millennials" born between 1981 and 1996 acknowledged a religious membership.

Denominational records confirm the Gallup Poll findings. American Baptist Church membership fell only 4 percent in the decade after 2010. But United Methodist Church membership fell 15 percent, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 22 percent, United Church of Christ 26 percent, and the Disciples of Christ 40 percent. Even the nation's largest Protestant denomination, the conservative Southern Baptist Convention, experienced a 13 percent membership decline from 16 million to 14 million members.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls below Majority for First Time," *Gallup News*, March 29, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/bdd4tuku>.

<sup>2</sup> Ryan Burge, "Why It's Unlikely U.S. Mainline Protestants Outnumber Evangelicals," *Religion Unplugged*, July 12, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2xm8735x>; Holly Meyer, "Southern Baptist Convention Membership Drops for

As church membership fell, America's multidimensional religious complexity increased, especially from non-European sources. The nation's Muslim population doubled from about 2 million in 2007 to almost 4 million in 2020. Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist populations also grew, all largely through immigration. Although these groups still constituted a tiny proportion of the US population, their increasing visibility worried conservative Christians especially. The number of Muslim mosques more than doubled from 1,200 in 2000 to over 2,700 in 2020, and Hindus claimed over 900 Hindu temples and centers in the US by 2020, not as expected in populous states with big cities but in smaller states with smaller cities, such as Mississippi and even South Dakota and Nebraska. Their multiplication reinvigorated rural Christians' traditionally dyspeptic views of America's cities, the nation's "hell holes," as revivalist Billy Sunday called them in the 1910s.<sup>3</sup>

The historical surprise, however, is that church membership was not axiomatic before 1900, even as the US has never been anything other than religiously heterogeneous. The United States did not cross the 50 percent line in church membership until the start of the twentieth century, and it took another half-century for membership in a religious group to reach the 60 percent range. This startling point emerged in a 1992 book by two historical sociologists, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*.<sup>4</sup> Baptists began publishing membership numbers as early as the 1760s, and Finke and Stark plundered the membership records filling the post-Revolutionary denominational proceedings that now weigh down seminary library shelves to compile their numbers. Startlingly, they discovered that fewer than 20 percent of adult Americans belonged to any religious group at the time of the American Revolution. Moreover, church membership rose only slowly through the nineteenth century, not passing the 50 percent mark until after 1900. One peculiar peak, probably optimistic, comes in an unusual 1913 YMCA religious survey of 3,100 University of Minnesota students, two-thirds of them men: 60 percent belonged to a church or synagogue, but 26 percent did not belong, although they expressed a preference, and 14 percent expressed no preference, the latter figures unfortunately not explained.<sup>5</sup>

Regrettably, we cannot know quite what to make of the vast numbers of unchurched Americans between the Revolution and the twentieth century. The

14th Year in a Row," *Nashville Tennessean*, May 28, 2021; Ian Lovett, "Houses of Worship Face Clergy Shortage as Many Resign during Pandemic," *Wall Street Journal*, February 21, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Besheer Mohamed, "New Estimates Show U.S. Muslim Population Continues to Grow," January 3, 2018, Pew Research Center, <https://tinyurl.com/muu6r3xu>; Mohamed, "Muslims Are a Growing Presence in the U.S., but Still Face Negative Views from the Public," September 1, 2021, Pew Research Center, <https://tinyurl.com/bddb29mn>; "List of Hindu Temples in the United States," *Wikipedia*, <https://tinyurl.com/bdfe7dud>; Billy Sunday quoted in Jon Butler, *God in Gotham: The Miracle of Religion in Modern Manhattan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776–2005: The Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 23; "Religious Census at 'U' Shows Church Affiliations," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, October 19, 1913.

denominational records track their absence from churches. But we cannot easily turn their large numbers into predecessors of our modern “nones” because we cannot know their motivations. We cannot ask them, “Were you ‘spiritual but not religious?’” as some respondents say now, or more straightforwardly, “Were you just too distant from a compatible congregation and minister?”—which implies that they were not nineteenth-century “nones” but believers simply awaiting a suitable minister and congregation.

Reviewers criticized Finke and Stark for a shallow analysis of “winners and losers” among American Protestants. But their numbers have generally held up and offer at least one very important clue to grappling with America’s post-2000 religious group membership decline: America’s early-twenty-first-century decline in church membership evidences a swing toward lower nineteenth-century membership patterns, not a fall from a past when everyone belonged because everyone believed. Indeed, however startling it may seem, America’s golden age of church and synagogue membership turns out to have been the post-World War II era between 1945 and 1970, not the vaunted colonial period. Even in Puritan Boston less than half of the town’s men belonged to a church in 1645, with no evidence they had been rejected or had even desired to join.<sup>6</sup>

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Certainly, part of the reason for strikingly low rates of church membership before 1900 hinged on environmental factors. The nation’s relentless population growth after 1800 and its spread across the vast American landscape challenged every religious group in America to do more and do it quickly. Denominations had to supply ever more clergy to serve small new communities of strangers who may or may not have shared religious inclinations. Denominations scrambled to find clergy for rural worshippers living on widely separated farms who, as much as new town residents, may or may not be inclined to support the worship a minister offered. In addition, low church membership before and after the Civil War meant that many migrating Americans simply did not bring membership expectations with them on their journey west.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the frequent tedium and officiousness of Europe’s Protestant and Catholic state churches produced significant divisions among immigrants much freer to choose in America. Emigrating Finns divided among supporters

<sup>6</sup> Peter Steinfels, “Beliefs: 2 Authors’ Contention That America Has Become More God-Fearing, Not Less So, Has Set Off a Debate,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1993; Darrett B. Rutman, *Winthrop’s Boston: Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630–1649* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 142–43.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen T. Kissel, *America’s Religious Crossroads: Faith and Community in the Emerging Midwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 1–14, 81–103.

of traditional Finnish state-church Lutheranism, several not always compatible Finnish evangelical movements, well-organized and anti-religious socialist-Marxist immigrants, and Finns just indifferent to religion. Divisions among other European immigrant groups might be equally complicated with different components, but none came to America without noticeable religious fissures among their numbers.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, America also was never religiously homogeneous, not even in the colonial period, even though membership rates remained low. Native Americans exhibited enormous variety in religious expression, and the all-too-common phrase “Native American religion” masks rich complexities in religious expression and practice. Puritans might have seemed homogeneous when they arrived in Massachusetts, but theological divisions appeared early. By 1638 they had banished the willful and articulate Anne Hutchinson for heresy, who took many followers with her, and in 1654 they dismissed Harvard’s first president, Henry Dunster, when he adopted Baptist views. New York resembled a spiritual Tower of Babel, as Governor Thomas Dongan reported in 1687:

Here be not many of the Church of England; few Roman Catholics; abundance of Quakers preachers men and Women especially; Singing Quakers, Ranting Quakers; Sabbatarians; Antisabbatarians; Some Anabaptists; some Independents; some Jews; in short, of all sorts of opinions there are some, and the most part [are] of none at all.<sup>9</sup>

French Protestant Huguenots settled in Boston, New York, and South Carolina after Louis XIV revoked their worship privileges in France in 1685. William Penn promoted religious toleration in Pennsylvania and drew not only English Quakers but Lutherans, Mennonites, Moravians, Amish, and Catholics from continental Europe.<sup>10</sup>

Post-Revolutionary America outraced colonial-era diversity, bringing new complications to America’s religious panorama. Methodists so out-organized all other Protestant groups that by the 1840s they constituted the largest Protestant group in the nation, even though Methodists had supported the Crown in the American Revolution. Meanwhile, substantial Irish Catholic immigration brought more and larger sanctuaries, while a rising Jewish presence brought multiplying synagogues in every East Coast city, then in every city west of the Appalachians.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Timothy L. Smith traced religious complications among Finnish and other immigrants to America in several articles, among them, “New Approaches to the History of Immigration in Twentieth-Century America,” *American Historical Review* 71, no. 4 (July 1966): 1265–79; “Religious Denominations as Ethnic Communities: A Regional Case Study,” *Church History* 35 (1966): 1–20; and “Religion and Ethnicity in America,” *American Historical Review* 83 (1978): 1155–85. Regrettably, Smith never pulled the essays together as a book.

<sup>9</sup> Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 64.

<sup>10</sup> Joel W. Martin, *The Land Looks After Us: A History of Native American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 200–60.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 175–77.

Just as twenty-first-century Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu immigrants divide by language, ethnicity, and national origin, so too did their American immigrant predecessors. Colonial-era English and Welsh Baptists seldom joined in the same congregations. Irish, Polish, German, and Italian Catholics arriving in the nineteenth century all sought priests of their own nationality leading ethnically homogeneous congregations. Immigrant Jews flooding into New York City after 1880 created one thousand or more congregations across the city, most worshipping in apartments and rented rooms in numbers sometimes scarcely making a minyan. There they shared not only national and regional identities but even town backgrounds. Then most of the congregations disappeared as their assimilating children formed far larger congregations worshipping in the large, impressive sanctuaries still scattered across the city. Lutheran immigrants divided and then coalesced like an accordion expanding and then compressing its bellows. By 1900, immigrant Lutherans in America had divided into more than sixty different groups and associations across the country defined by nationality, language, theology, and region. Then as assimilation proceeded, second- and third-generation Lutherans steadily merged into fewer and fewer denominational entities, uniting on shared theological and liturgical principles until just three major Lutheran denominations existed by the 1960s.<sup>12</sup>

Spiritual creativity dramatically increased America's religious heterogeneity, often far beyond orthodox Christianity. French Mesmerism became at least a momentary fad in America after the Revolution, while new Swedenborgian congregations in several cities readily found eager worshippers. Ann Lee's tiny British Shaker movement bloomed in rural New York, eclipsing its British origins, then found further renewal in migrating to rural Ohio.<sup>13</sup>

In upstate New York, Joseph Smith, whose family had been in America since the 1630s, published *The Book of Mormon* in 1830 when he was twenty-five and quickly found adherents who soon followed him to Ohio, Indiana, Missouri, and Illinois. The "rappings" of New York's Fox sisters in 1848 led to a rapidly expanding spiritualist movement replete with newspapers and extensive lecture circuits. Then a Baptist minister, William Miller, startlingly predicted that Jesus would return in 1843. Despite the failure of Miller's prediction and several revisions, the hope he untethered spawned multiple Adventist groups awaiting the second coming, the best-known being the Seventh-day Adventist Church which organized in 1863; the movement became a vibrant, worldwide one, as it is today. The writings of the Mesmerist and healer Phineas Quimby spawned the post-Civil War New Thought movement, from which came "mind-cure" and spiritual science offshoots, the most prominent being Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science church.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Bill J. Leonard, *Baptists in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 30, 112–14; Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 90–99; Butler, *God in Gotham*, 70–73, 94–95; Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 759–61.

<sup>13</sup> Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 234–44; Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 3–39, 57–66.

<sup>14</sup> Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 225–56.

Yet the religious heterodoxy of America's past produced as much bitterness and hate as it does today. Massachusetts authorities simply could not stomach divisions even within Protestantism and hung three Quakers in Boston in 1659 and 1651, two men and one woman, when they refused to stop preaching in Boston. Connecticut authorities hung eleven witches as agents of the devil across three decades before Massachusetts executed nineteen more at the 1692–1693 Salem witch trials. Church of England vestrymen in Virginia may have deserted the king to support the American Revolution in 1776, but they spent the 1760s imprisoning and sometimes whipping itinerant Baptist preachers who threatened their monopoly on worship.<sup>15</sup>

Independence did not improve the record despite the First Amendment's guarantee of "free exercise" in religion. Anti-Catholic mobs burned the Ursuline convent in Boston in 1834, and Philadelphia nativists attacked Catholic homes and churches in 1844, fueled by the rising anti-Catholic, anti-Mason, Know-Nothing party. A Missouri militia murdered seventeen Mormons including women and children in 1838, and an 1844 Illinois mob murdered the Mormon leader Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum in Carthage after dragging them from a jail. Eastern Europe's massive post-1880 Jewish immigration to America renewed commonplace Protestant and Catholic slurs about Jews as "Christ-killers" and increased social, educational, and economic discrimination against Jews, a striking parallel to post-1990 anti-Muslim sentiment that stemmed from increased Muslim immigration to America, then exploded into denunciations of Islam, vandalism of mosques, and targeted killings of Muslims after the 9/11 tragedy.<sup>16</sup>

Although America's twenty-first-century religious violence did not arrive unexpectedly, differences are important. The mobs that attacked Boston's Catholic convent, vandalized Catholic homes in Philadelphia, and pulled Joseph Smith from his Carthage, Illinois, jail before slaying him operated in full public view. In contrast, our modern vandals who deface mosques, temples, and synagogues hide their identities by striking at night, while single assassins, not mobs, murder Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs. That said, an internet flush with anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and anti-Sikh websites urges them on, much as the old mobs did, offering virtual comfort and reinforcement that formerly came from the thrill of group action. The Anti-Defamation League, Muslim and Sikh organizations, and ecumenical agencies in Christian denominations track and expose sources of religious hatred.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Yaccino, Michael Schwirtz, and Marc Santora, "Gunman Kills 6 at Sikh Temple near Milwaukee," *New York Times*, August 5, 2012, <https://tinyurl.com/ymur4mrf>; Katayoun Kishi, "Assaults against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level," November 15, 2017, Pew Research Center, <https://tinyurl.com/y2z73z4y>; Ruth Graham and Liam Stack, "U.S. Faces Outbreak of Anti-Semitic Threats and Violence," *New York Times*, May 26, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/5n87x966>; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 209–43; Jon Butler, "James Ireland, John Leland, John 'Swearing Jack' Waller, and the Baptist Campaign for Religious Freedom in Revolutionary Virginia," in *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation*, ed. Gary B. Nash, Alfred Young, and Ray Raphael (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 169–84.

<sup>16</sup> Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 149, 179, 506, 561, 563, 852–56; Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 20, 37.

But uncovering and arresting secretive individuals to prevent religious violence has frustrated religious groups, police, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation for years.

Given this past, perhaps our question should be different: Can our future be saved from our past, at least major portions of it? Two and a half books can help decipher the challenges of membership and the growing sense that religion just isn't important—that is, a growing secularism—while a third book in American Jewish history might remind us of the stakes at hand, or the stakes that should be at hand.

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The source I dub a “half” book, because it's short, comes from a political scientist and Baptist minister, Ryan Burge: *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*, provides a useful guide to basic numbers and context about declining belief and membership. Like the Pew Research Center, which regularly tracks contemporary religious trends, Burge notes that even though overt atheism and agnosticism have risen from 4 to 7 percent among poll respondents, these numbers still are very small. Reassuringly, belief in the transcendent, in God, still tracks in the lower 90 percent range among poll respondents. Yet the current membership trouble resides among growing numbers of these respondents who also say that their religious sentiments consist of “nothing in particular.” These are the “nones,” and they are the people leaving churches. Why? Burge identifies several very general causes, from late-arriving European-style secularization and competition from the internet to a decline in socialization and the culture wars, “macro” causes that scarcely seem remediable by individual clergy and congregations.<sup>17</sup>

The most satisfying examination of twenty-first-century American congregational life and religion comes from a large ten-year-old book, Robert Putnam and David Campbell's 2010 *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. It misses the last tumultuous decade in American religion and life, its account of America's religious history is rosier than our discussion here, and its polling data sometimes numbs. Yet *American Grace* offers a deeply thoughtful and synoptic account of America's twenty-first-century religious condition, and its themes go to the heart of contemporary congregational life. It was the first major study to identify the rise of the “nones” as a significant challenge to the previous half century of large-scale religious belonging. It identifies much of the religious dissatisfaction among the “nones” as coming from mainstream liberals dismayed, in part,

<sup>17</sup> Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021), 35–67; Michael Lipka, “A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing Religious ‘Nones,’” Pew Research Center, May 13, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/2s4fnj8n>.



by evangelical conservative partisanship (and this was before the presidency of Donald Trump). It appreciates the growth of a broad American religious tolerance despite setbacks. It stresses the central importance of sociability in congregational life. But best, *American Grace* draws vivid portraits of real-life worshippers and clergy working through the weekly challenges of the religion's relevance in twenty-first-century times. Putnam and Campbell's portraits of congregants in their pews and clergy in their pulpits make *American Grace* a compelling and still-relevant read. Plus, age has its benefits in cheap and widely available used copies.<sup>18</sup>

David Sehat's new book, *This Earthly Frame: The Making of American Secularism*, can help clergy and worshippers better grasp the increasingly bitter debate over religion in American public life and the way religion shapes convictions about race and white supremacy, homosexuality, gender, and, recently, vaccinations.<sup>19</sup> Theological convictions underpin the view of each side in this debate. But the frequent lawyerly focus on US Supreme Court decisions leaves many clergy and worshippers feeling helpless on the sidelines. Here is where Sehat's *This Earthly Frame* proves so helpful. It deftly lays out the legal and constitutional issues in clear, jargon-free prose. It unravels misunderstood tensions between the First Amendment's ban on the "establishment of religion" and its guarantee of the "free exercise thereof." *This Earthly Frame* does not resolve the debate, nor could it. But it deftly outlines the gulf increasingly separating mainstream Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy and worshippers from their evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish counterparts and explains much, if not all, of how we've come to the precipice where we all now stand uncomfortably together.

But are the concerns about membership and debates over human sexuality and vaccines pulling us away from the reasons we should care about faith itself? Sometimes, voices in other traditions can help clarify matters in our own. Julian Zelizer's new and especially fine biography, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Life of Radical Amazement*, probes one such voice: that of a Holocaust refugee almost too well known for his aphorism about marching with Martin Luther King at Selma in 1965—"I felt my legs were praying." Heschel's books and lectures had already made him the most famous rabbi in America. In the religious boom when suburban sanctuaries multiplied and synagogue and church membership soared between 1945 and the 1960s, Heschel asked if congregations existed just for belonging, men's and women's groups, and youth programs. In a world still crying out for purpose, for meaning, and for justice, he demanded more and focused particularly on the young and on the lure of an empty postwar materialism:

Let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every little deed counts. That every word has power, and that we can, everyone, do our share to redeem the world in spite of all

<sup>18</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> David Sehat, *This Earthly Frame: The Making of American Secularism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build life as if it were a work of art. You are not a machine. And you are young. Start working on this great work of art called your own existence.<sup>20</sup>

Heschel's challenge was not misplaced. Understanding complexities in our past may corral startling turns in our future. But amid everyday concerns about sliding membership, "nones," bigotry, and religious violence, Heschel points out the concerns of purpose, meaning, and justice that rightly embed every faith's redemptive imperatives. Heschel believed they could not be shirked in his time. Nothing suggests they can be shirked now. ⊕

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<sup>20</sup> Julian E. Zelizer, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Life of Radical Amazement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 222.