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Religion, What Is It?, 1980.

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RELIGION, WHAT IS IT?

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER DECEMBER 21, 1990

If you want to look up some material on Judaism in the Public Library you would go to the shelves marked Religion. I teach at Case Western Reserve University in the Department of Religion. The activities of this congregation are protected by the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights which says simply "that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

By convention and by concensus Judaism is a religion. Because many judge an individual example, in this case Judaism, by their attitudes towards the larger classification, I thought it might be well if we spent a few minutes with no other purpose than to try to understand the phenomenon known as religion, a word most everybody uses and almost everybody uses with a different significance.

When I ask students for their definition some tell me that religion is superstition. Others tell me that religion is mystification, a glorification of that which we do not yet understand. Others tell me that religion represents all that is good, valid and valuable, a consecration of virtue. All of us carry prejudgements about religion around with us. Prejudgement, incidentally, is just a nice way of saying prejudice.

Those for whom religion represents all that is good, valid and valuable are prepared, almost indiscriminately, to support anything that goes under its banner. I remember a businessman who told me that he wouldn't hire anybody who wasn't religious. An ad campaign some years ago used the theme:

"the family that prays together stays together." On the other hand there are those who believe that religion represents credulity or an attempt by crafty ecclesiastics to take people's minds off their problems so that they are not liable to attack the privileged and the established. Marx damned religion as the opiate of the masses.

I am not interested in establishing a satisfactory dictionary definition, but I'd like to clear up our understanding so that it will be easier for us to think without prejudgment about our religion, Judaism.

Point one. Religions existed long before anybody knew there was such a thing as religion. Religion is a universal phenomenon. Any group which is cohesive and shares a single culture, has a religion.

The Hebrew word for religion is <u>dat</u>. Most of you have either spoken the word or had the word spoken to you because it's part of the traditional wedding formula <u>Ha'rei at-mekudeshet li . . kodat Moshe v'Yisroel</u>, be thou consecrated unto me by this ring according to the <u>dat</u>, according to the practices, the religion, of Moses and Israel.

Actually, the Bible never uses the term religion. Dat occurs only in the book of Esther, a late scroll of the Persian period, where it designates a royal decree. When Esther seeks to invite Ahasuerus, the king, and Haman, the Prime Minister, to a banquet in her chambers she is told by her advisers that she may not enter the royal audience chamber uninvited because this is the dat, the official imperial

practice of Persia.

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Over the next centuries <u>dat</u> came to be applied not only to imperial decrees but to the decrees of the King of kings, to God's own decrees. The <u>Mishnah</u>, the second, third century code of Jewish law has a section known as <u>Ketubot</u>, which deals with the marriage contract, the terms of the contract and the ways in which the <u>Ketubah</u> may be dissolved. Among its rules is one which stipulates that certain women, if divorced, cannot claim what is stipulated as theirs in the marriage contract because they have violated the <u>dat Moshe v'yahudit</u>, the law of Moses and the customs of the Jews. In the <u>Tosefta</u>, a slightly later code this phrase is changed into the more familiar <u>dat Moshe Yisrael</u>. So by the third century of our era the word <u>dat</u> has come to describe the God-mandated practices of the Jew.

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The Greco-Roman world was a world of travelers and academicians and the first culture to become conscious of the differences in religious practices of a wide variety of tribes and peoples. They used a word, <u>religio</u>, which means simply that which is tied down and bound together, to describe the practices of a given community. In the ancient world all customs and laws were religious since all had the sanction of the god or the gods. <u>Religio</u> as a noun defined religious practices.

By the time of the Gemarrah, the second of the major law codes of our people, we find <u>dat</u> used in the sense of the separate codes and practices of various peoples their religions. In the ancient world when a woman intermarried she took on the laws and the practices of her husband. The Talmud uses the phrase, <u>le'hamir dat</u>, to change one's laws, to describe a woman who intermarries and so comes under a non-Jewish set of laws - an apostate. In time men discovered that there are similarities in form at least between one <u>dat</u> and another, and <u>dat</u>, religion, emerged as the term which defined this general area of sacred beliefs and practice.

In Europe in the Middle Ages, those who wrote dictionaries defined religion as faith in God, particularly the Christian faith. Their focus was less on the practices and the customs of many traditions than on the body of beliefs of their tradition. Many moderns still take the parochial view that religion can be defined as belief in God. During the Age of Discovery as travelers discovered here, there and everywhere shrines, temples, hymns, ikons, scriptures and holy men, religion came to describe Hinduism, Buddhism, the Confucian tradition, Islam and Judaism as well as Christianity. Since these traditions had much in common religion came to be accepted as a definition of institutions having similar forms and institutions: temples, shrines, scriptures, priests, holy men, magical rites, sacrifices, prayer services and the like.

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classical religions they found they could not satisfactorily describe an all-encompassing common denominator. Some religions had a written scripture. Islam has the Koran; Christianity has the New Testament; we have the Tanach; but other religions have only an oral tradition. Some religions have pagodas, stupas, shrines and temples. Others worship in the open air. Some religions have holy men and shamans; some have no priesthood at all. Some have hymns and sacred dances; some worship in absolute silence. Some believe in God, fome in gods. The Confucian tradition believed in the Mandate of Heaven, cosmic order, but not in a supernatural power which could be called a god.

Obviously, a new approach had to be taken to the definition of religion and the question which began to be asked had to do with function rather than form. Why are there religions? What basic human need does religion serve? What is the function of religion in the social order? It now became apparent that religion represents the attempt by a community to declare sacred, valid and ultimately meaningful, a certain set of values, a vision of life and a set of assumptions about the importance of specific actions. Religion consecrates a certain understanding of what is fit and appropriate.

"It has been told you, o man, what is good." Religion is the way a group of people declares its for ethics to be right and beyond question; its social structure to be appropriate and beyond question; and its view of life, death and immortality to be right and beyond question.

A modern definition of religion might take this form: religion represents that cluster of ideas, myths, rituals, ceremonies, hopes, visions and insti-

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tutions through which a society conforms and affirms its basic attitudes towards

life and its familiar affirmations about values.

We are born into a particular time, into a particular place, into a particular society, without any act of decision on our part. Its values may be congenial to our nature or not. Being curious we ask questions about what was before and what is now and what will happen beyond. Accidents will happen. Illness will occur to us and those we care about. We will die. There is no way of proving that our understanding of these events is a valid one. We are taught to conform to a certain set of customs, rituals, promises and family relationships. There's no way of proving that our set of values is better than another or that what we believe to be right is in fact right. Yet, since confusion paralyzes, there is a need to transcend doubt. Indecision weakens our resolve so there is a need to transcend our perplexities. Religion is the social mechanism by which a society organizes and declares sacred its practices, its values and its vision. Sanity requires religion.

Religion exists in all societies at all times. A fine tutor of history I knew at college used to say that religion has become an elective in modern society. He meant that only one in two Americans has joined a church or a synagogue. Our world has developed what sociologists call neutral space in order to allow people of different religions to live and work together without having to give up their *helyjour* identities. In a tribe or clan where everyone is bound by the same set of consecrated customs, the same religion, there is no room for an outsider. In our world membership in a religion is no longer automatic and in America many have opted out of the traditional affiliations, so men like my tutor feel that religion is an elective. Some take. Some do not.

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Some tutors still defined religion by those groups he called religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam etc. However, when we look at religions in the way here suggested, as the cluster of ideas, myths, rituals and institutions by which a group consecrates, affirms and confirms a set of values, visions and attitudes, a different picture emerges. It becomes apparent not only that religion is a universal phenomenon, but also, surprisingly, that this is one of the great ages of faith, perhaps the greatest age of religious creativity that the world has ever known. I speak not only of the renaissance of Islam and the impact of the population explosion in Latin and South America on Roman Catholicism but on Fascism, Communism and Maoism, religions which have made tens of millions of converts in our century either by the compelling force of their arguments or by the compelling force of their armaments. The old traditional religions may no longer be as universally compelling but religion remains as universal need and our age has, if anything, a desperate need. No one can live without some set of consecrated beliefs which they feel defines, shapes, gives meaning to life for them; and a society which endures a period of convulsion urgently, and not necessarily wisely, to religion.

I always have trouble convincing some in my class that Communism is a religion. They tell me it's anti-religious and on one level they're right. Communist ideology affirms that religion, which it defines in the old-fashioned way as the existing European religions, is a propaganda device designed to take men's minds off practical solutions to their problems by preaching the virtue of deferred expectations and patience; life is a trial, you'll have your reward in the World to Come. In Communist theory religion stands in the way of consciousness-raising among the proletariat and the peasantry.

There is some truth to this charge, but Marxx's anti-religion

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ideology does not prove that Communism itself is not a religion. No enmity is more bitter than that which can break out between religions. No wars are more vindictive than religious wars. Truth cannot tolerate being challenged. I describe Communism as a classic authoritarian western religion still in a medieval caste. There is a truth, clear and defined; Pravda means the Comt. There is a

sacred office which defines orthodoxy and condemns heresy. There is an inquisition which sends heretics to Siberia or to the Gulag Archipelago. There are the ecclesiastics, the cadres of the Communist Party. There is a scripture, Das Kapital, and a Rashi, Lenin's commentaries. There is a messianist doctrine based on the claim that there are iron laws which make it inevitable that history follow a certain course withl at the ind of days a dictatorship of the proletariat will occur and then wither away, leaving utopia, a period of justice and peace for all men. Communism has spread in the same way that Christianity originally spread, by the conversion of political leaders, by the appeal of its gospel and by force, and remains in control by establishing a state church which maintains a parochial school system. Communism is not simply an economic ideology. It is a religion, a cluster of ideas, institutions, visions, rituals, myths, which consecrate, confirm and affirm a certain set of values.

My students live in a world where there is no state church and no authorized ideology. They see that many do not belong to a church or to a synagogue, so they wonder how I can say that everybody has a religion. By way of an answer, I introduce them to the concept of civil religion. In a country like the United States there is a set of ideas which are implicit in the national institutions and which form the base of the majority's code of beliefs and ethics.

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In America the Scripture is the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. There are massive commentaries on the Scriptures, the decisions of the court system. There are venerated patriarchs: Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson and Roosevelt. There are the holidays: Fourth of July and Thanksgiving. There are confirmed and affirmed values: individual freedom, social contract and citizenship responsibility.

How can a loose set of values be called a religion? These values are part of the social fabric deeply held, culturally formative, and assumed to be redemptive. We take their rightness for granted though we cannot prove that they are right. We consecrate our lives to those values and base national policy on them though there is no way of proving that this is the proper form for human organization. Deep down we believe that ultimately the rest of the world will come to our understanding and our national policies take that goal into account. Our messianism is not as confident and as certain as Communist ideology, but it's there. It can be stated this way: with the spread of technology and learning the democratic way with its reverence for individual liberty will spread around the world. Ultimately, the underdeveloped countries will develop and take on the forms which we have found to be successful, become like us, partners in a world where all people enjoy justice and freedom.

This is an age thirsty for religion because it's a confused and convulsed age. All values are being questioned. All social forms are being reshaped. All learning is being questioned. All of the matrices of our lives, our sense of self, marriage, family, responsibility, citizenship, are being tossed about in the maelstrom of modern urban life.

Religion exists because we would be paralyzed without it. The religious

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revolutions of our time have occurred because a convulsive society would be unable to act if it didn't bind to itself and consecrate a set of coherent values which it affirmed as <u>sacred</u>.

sum total of hymna heretaess. Ballgion must be iduged like any other

problem with the new religions and some of the old ones The is that theirs is the only way and that all ultimately must come to Medieval Islam claims that again. The Roman Catholic church it. takes this position. So does Communism. Other traditions can live with church takes this position. So does Communism. Other traditions can live with the idea that every religion has its sacred and special message, and that this message is functional in the sense that society is organized around it and could not live without it. They sense that we live in a multivaried society and that we must appreciate the force of other messages and allow them their integrity of their beliefs. The feligious faith is hard to restrain and has about it a tendency toward imperialism. I can only believe that what I believe is right and, therefore, it's difficult for me to believe that you don't see eye to eye or share my concern. For your sake and the How do we prove that our values world's I must bring you around. are sacred, consecrated and holy? It used to be that all we had to say is God spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai and that six hundred thousand people were there who heard God's voice; but we know now that every religion has a myth of this kind which claims to confirm and authenticate its truth. What establishes the rightness

of our message? By your deeds shall you be known. Some religions enhance personality; others demand abject submission. The proof lies not in the founding myth but in the ability of the religion to found and support a healthy and creative society.

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Religion is. Religion is elemental. You can't do without it.

Those prejudgements that many bring to religion that religion is

good or superstition, are meaningless. All religions are functional,

but function does not necessarily prove that a religion adds to the

sum total of human happiness. Religion must be jduged like any other

social phenomenon, by its consequences, by its impact on the people who belong, and the world of which it is a part. Does religion turn people in on themselves, blind them to other truths and encourage their tendency towards fanaticism? Does it try to impose its ideas on society by force? Does it encourage the individual conscience or demand ultimate total submission to its teaching and ecclesiastical authority?

Religion is universal. It exists everywhere at all times and always will. Our prejudgments about religion are based on old, outdated identifications of religion with a shopping list of specific religions. Judge Judaism in terms of itself. Judge Judaism in terms of its impact on human beings. Has Judaism made for good? Has it produced sensitive, intelligent and concerned citizens? Has it turned its devoted away from humanity or towards it? Has it tried to develop the mind or force us to submit to its demands.

Religion must be judged by its consequences and judged carefully because religion is a very, very dangerous phenomenon.

Anything you believe in and believe to be sacred is a value you will not conpromise. Anything you believe in or believe to be sacred you will another person, your children, your spouse, your friend, your neighbor, your community should adopt; and you will move heaven and earth to make this happen. It's hard to accept that another intelligent, sensitive and moral human

being will not see what seems incontrovertible to you. Few re-

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heaven.

Religious imperialism underlies our world's problems. Our political tensions represent not simply competing national entities seeking salt water ports or oil. I have long held that they are at base the tensions of competing religions. When historians write the tale of our century they will describe it in the same terms that we now use for the seventeenth century which, you will recall, was a century of religious war between Protestants and Catholics.

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Religions are necessary. Psychologists speak of a will to believe. We have to transcend doubt and confusion and stand on some kind of solid ground in order to be able to step forward vigorously into the future. Religions are functional. Judge you must because religions can precipitate the mass suicides at Jonestown and holy wars or organize civil rights marches and hunger centers. Each religion has its unique form and therefore makes its own special impact on the world and on its social order. "By their deeds shall ye judge them."

Let's judge Judaism for what it is, what it has meant to us, what it has meant to the world, and not by any preconception, about the concept of religion. Religion is not an illusion. Religion is not the quintessence of morality. Religion is no more and no less than our need to stand on solid ground and to feel that values that we believe in are right, the things we do are consequential, and that our lives are redeemed. Redemption is the sense of worth we all seek, the worthwhileness of how we live.

I commend Judaism to you. We have a good religion, but not all religions

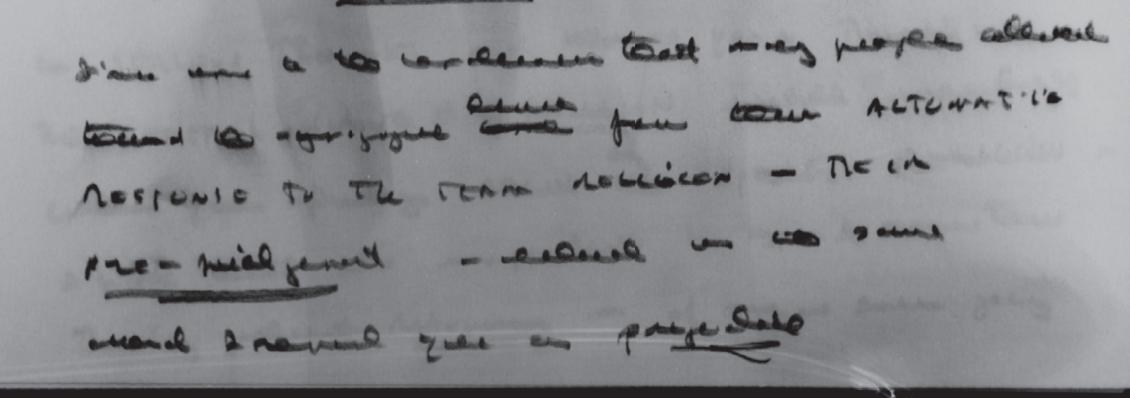
are good and not all forms of Judaism are equally good. Religion requires a great deal of judgment and not prejudgment, and if I've convinced you of that

I've accomplished what I set out to accomplish.

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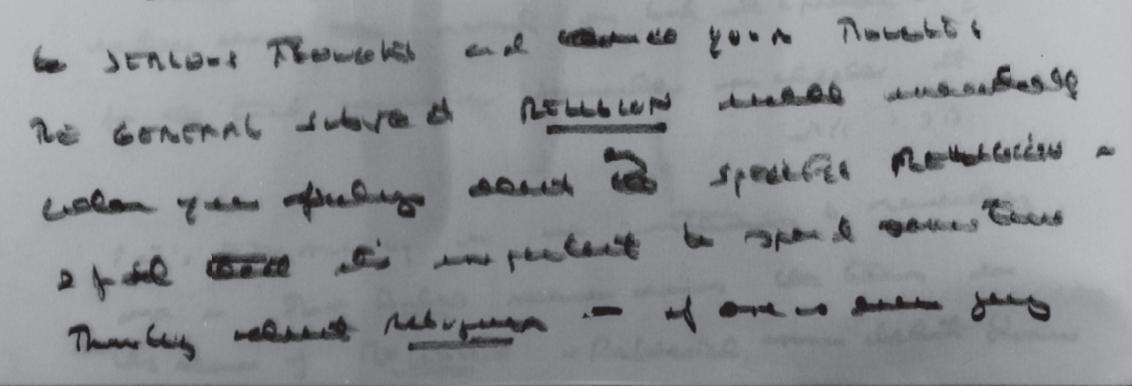
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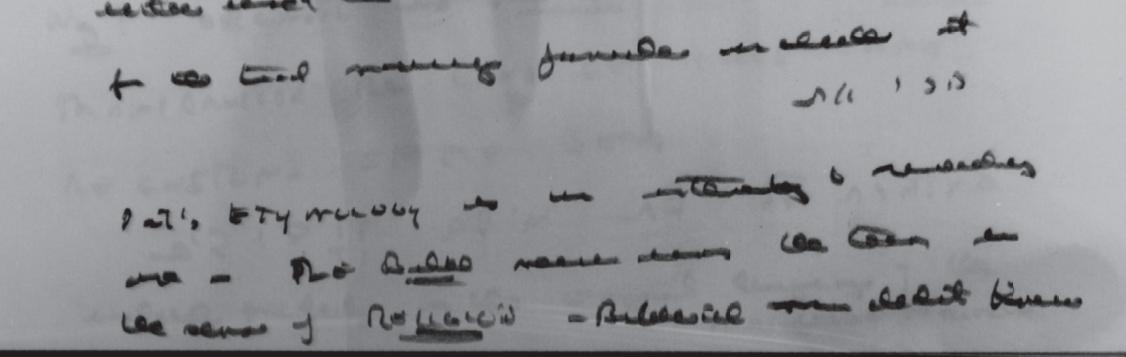


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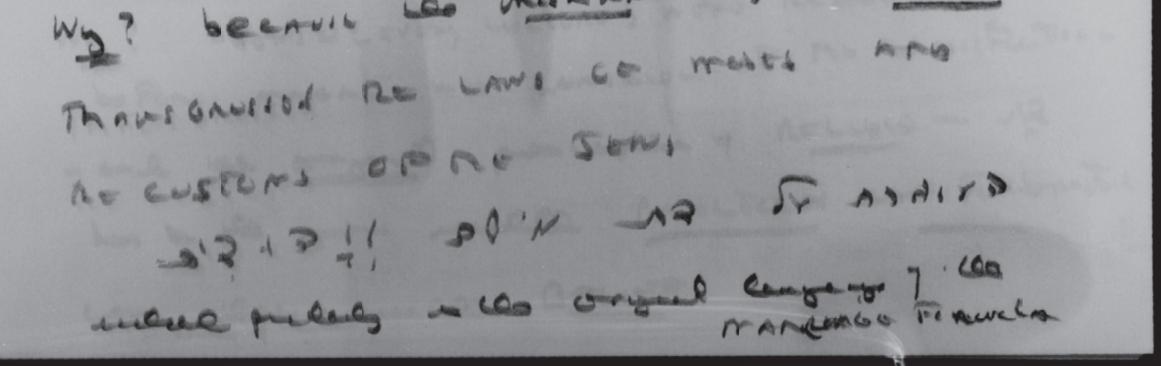
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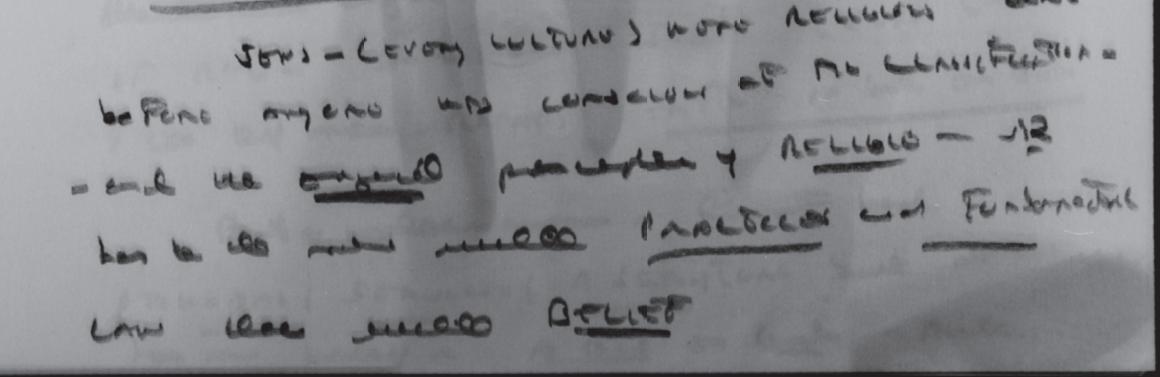
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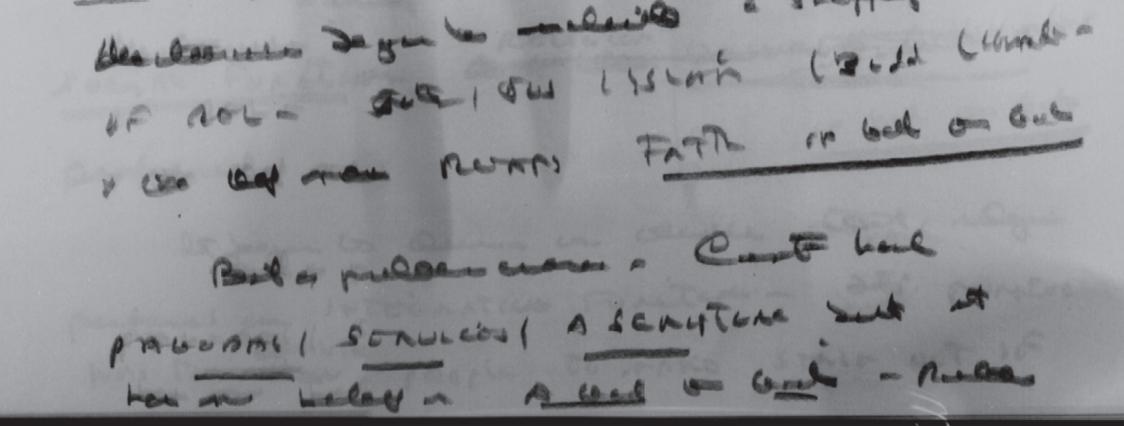
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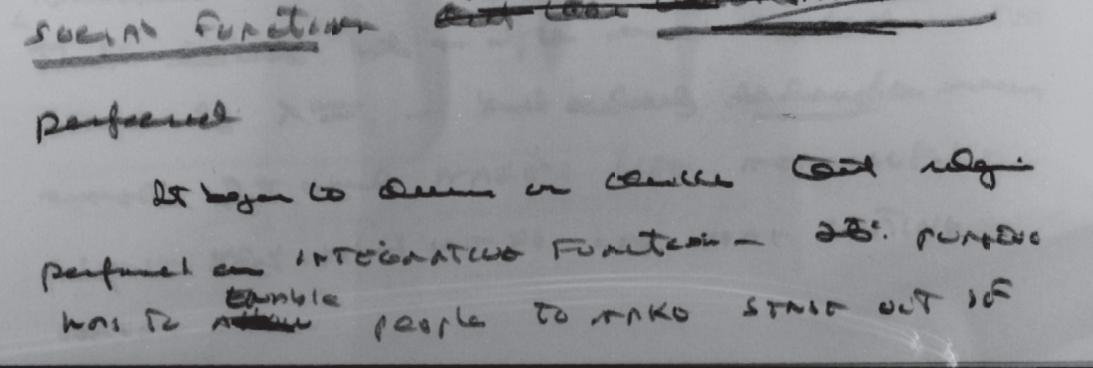
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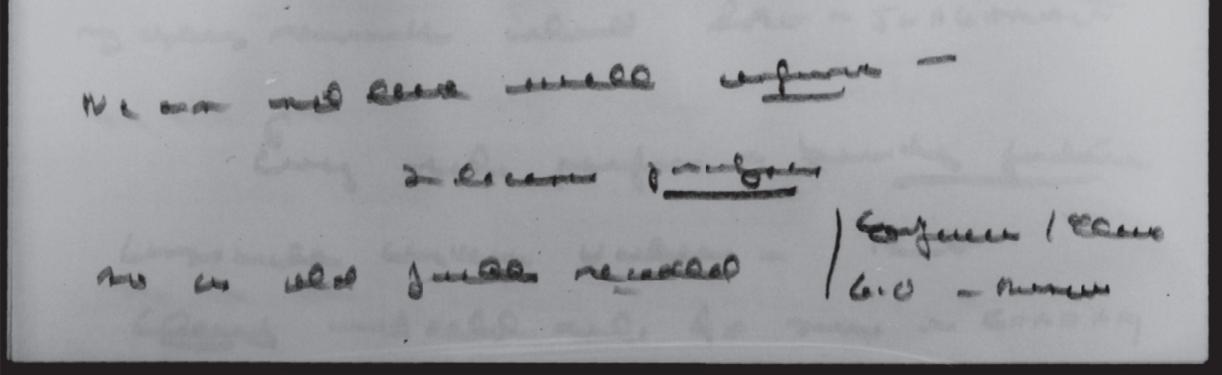


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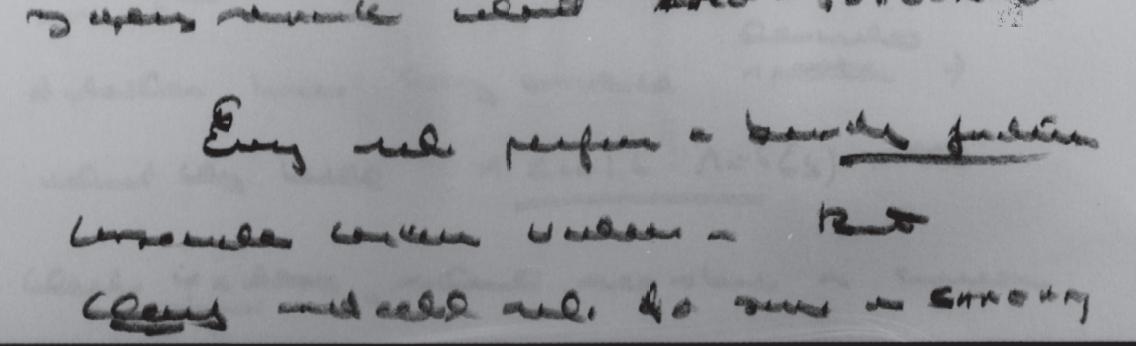


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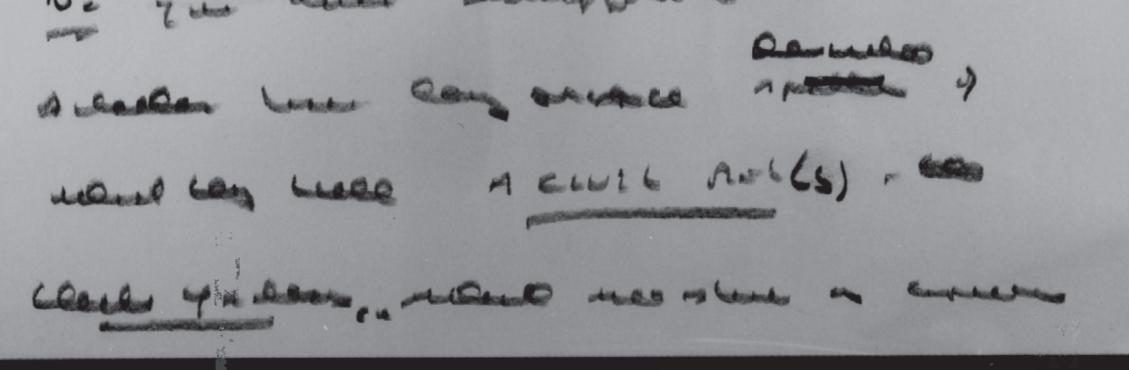
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