
Religion, Reductionism, and the Godly Soul: Lubavitch Hasidic Jewishness and the Limits of Classificatory Thought

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This essay explores the limits of the classificatory category of religion through an analysis of Lubavitch Hasidic discourses of Jewishness. The Lubavitch Hasidim articulate a distinctive vision of Jewish identity based on what they describe as a uniquely Jewish “godly soul,” inherited by all Jews from the biblical patriarchs. The godly soul sits, uncomfortably, on the conceptual boundaries of “race” and “religion,” as these reductive categories of social analysis are typically understood. Though it may be classified in such terms, it is better described as a conceptual singularity that resists the mechanisms of classificatory thought. To understand such singular phenomena, I argue, we need to develop a social antireductionism—a mode of analysis that interrogates the categories of the modern social sciences without appealing to a transcendent space beyond the social world.

CRUSTACEANS, RELIGIONS, AND ANTIREDUCTIONISMS

IN AN OFT-QUOTED and delightfully eccentric passage toward the beginning of his classic text, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,

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William James places the classificatory episteme of the modern social sciences in tension with the stubborn individuality of a not-so-humble crab. He writes:

The first thing the intellect does with an object is to class it along with something else. But any object that is infinitely important to us and awakens our devotion feels to us also as if it must be *sui generis* and unique. Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. "I am no such thing," it would say; "I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone." (James 2002 [1902]: 9)

Despite the privileged place of individuals and their devotions in his understanding of religious life, James rejects the crab's plea and insists on the importance of classification in the production of legitimate scientific knowledge—on the epistemic necessity of conceptual categories, like "mysticism," "conversion," and for that matter "religion," that embrace and explain the unruly facts of social and spiritual life.

Yet in the century or so since James's crab made its impassioned plea, scholars of religion have often been divided on the methodological significance of classification, and the very nature of classificatory thought. Many who draw theoretical inspiration from the modern social sciences have stressed the importance of classification as an essential component of scholarly research. For these self-described reductionist scholars, the classification of religious phenomena is linked to a broader project of explaining religion in sociological terms—reducing the transcendent claims of religious traditions to concepts drawn from the social sciences. Though he rarely, if ever, uses the term "reductionist," one of the most articulate advocates of this classificatory approach has been Jonathan Z. Smith. Smith has been deeply critical of common sense, monothetic understandings of classification, and of ideologically loaded classificatory schemes which "reduce [the world's religions] to 'ours' and 'theirs'" (Smith 2004a: 174; see also 1978, 1982b, 2000). Yet at the same time, he has passionately defended the intellectual necessity of classification, placing it at the heart of his influential vision of religious studies. He weighs the fate of James's crab and concludes that, "To fail to reject the crab's sentence is to condemn the study of religion to the inconclusive study of individuals and individual phenomena So classify we must" (2004a: 174). A failure to do so, Smith suggests, marks an abdication of one's basic responsibilities as a member of the academy (*ibid.*). Indeed he argues, in the strongest

possible terms, that “the rejection of classificatory interest is, at the same time, a rejection of thought” (2000: 43).

Smith is equally emphatic, though equally complex, when it comes to the classificatory category of religion, a category at the heart of religious studies as a scholarly field. He has famously argued that “Religion’ is not a native category” (2004b: 179), but a scholarly construct which has “no independent existence apart from the academy” (1982a: xl). And he has done as much as any scholar to chart the sociopolitical history of the term. Yet Smith insists, nevertheless, that the concept of religion remains essential to any “disciplined study” of the traditions and communities conventionally designated by this term (2004b: 194). He argues, in short, that if we are overly concerned with the theoretical and political pitfalls of classification—pitfalls he himself has worked to highlight—we will never learn anything worth knowing about our world. We must, Smith and other reductionists feel, be able to classify phenomena as crustaceans or arachnids, Christians or Jews, religions or what-have-you.

Many other scholars have argued, however, that the classificatory apparatus of the modern, Western academy ultimately cannot, or should not, embrace the global diversity of religious life. These critics of classification have generally come from two very different theoretical perspectives, which we might describe—or perhaps even classify—as phenomenological and poststructuralist antireductionisms. Since the mid-twentieth century, many phenomenologically inclined historians of religion have echoed James’s crab by insisting that religion is “*sui generis* and unique,” and thus fundamentally unclassifiable. Following Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and others, these self-described antireductionists have argued that the experiential essence of religious life lies “quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar” (Otto 1958 [1917]: 26), and therefore cannot be contained within the reductive concepts of the social sciences. Though such scholars often rely, in an uncritical fashion, on conceptual categories like “religion” and “the sacred,” they feel such categories ultimately refer to transcendent realities which, as Eliade puts it in a slightly different context, “will yield to no formula or definition whatever” (Eliade 1963: xiv). They therefore imagine religious studies as a site of encounter with radical difference—with the “wholly other” as well as other cultures—rather than a social science aspiring to classification. For fifty years or so, scholars of religion been divided by these conflicting views of the field.

This is, I should make clear, a somewhat eccentric reading of the longstanding debate between reductionists and antireductionists in religious studies. Although differing approaches to classification have often

been raised within this debate, it has been centered, above all, on disputes about causality—on the question of whether religious practices, beliefs, and experiences may be causally attributed, and thus reduced, to political, economic, and other non-religious forces. What is ultimately at stake is the relationship between religion and society, or between religion and other aspects of social life.¹ I have chosen, however, to re-describe this debate in terms of classification, in an effort to carve out a middle ground between the familiar reductionist and antireductionist positions. I would like to distinguish, as clearly as possible, between the antireductionist critique of classification, which I largely embrace, and the antireductionist claim that religion transcends society, which I absolutely do not embrace—and, conversely, to distinguish between the reductionist view of religion as a social phenomenon and the reductionist argument that it may therefore be best understood in the categorical terms of the modern social sciences. These competing claims about religion and society must, I think, be set apart from the methodological claims about the status of the social sciences that have generally accompanied them in religious studies. By making this distinction, I hope to suggest a middle ground in this longstanding debate, and perhaps a new way forward for the study of religion.

This proposed middle ground will build, in part, on a number of recent critiques of category formation in religious studies and other fields—what I would describe as a kind of poststructuralist antireductionism. Following the pioneering work of Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and others—including, ironically, Smith—a growing number of scholars have argued that classificatory categories like religion are inextricably tied to hierarchical systems of power. In a range of different ways, scholars like Talal Asad (1993), David Chidester (1996), and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) have shown how the classification of distinct “religions,” as well as the overarching concept of “religion,” has helped to support Western colonial domination by placing a European, and ultimately Christian, category at the heart of our understanding of global human diversity. The process of classification thus appears, to some, as an exercise of cultural hegemony—an imposition of our terms on others—rather than a legitimate mode of cross-cultural analysis. These poststructuralist scholars certainly do not share the phenomenological antireductionist argument that religion transcends the social world—or, for that matter, the essentialist view of religion as a universal, transhistorical phenomenon that tends to

¹ For relatively non-polemical introductions to the often quite bitter reductionism debates, see Allen (2002: 3–63) and Idinopulos and Yonan (1994). And for a recent discussion of reductionism that touches on questions of classification, see Cho and Squier (2008).

accompany such claims of transcendence—but their work nevertheless resonates, in many ways, with antireductionist critiques of the social sciences. They may not agree that James’s crab is “*sui generis* and unique,” but they do share its “sense of personal outrage” at being “class [ed] ... as a crustacean, and thus dispose[d] of.”

In the wake of these critiques, I would argue, scholars of religion must reexamine the conceptual categories that have structured our work. We must develop what I will describe here as a wholly social anti-reductionism—a mode of analysis that interrogates the categories of the modern social sciences, showing their limits, exploring their gaps, and questioning their imposition on other societies, yet without appealing to a transcendent space lying somewhere beyond the social world. As I will show, this poststructuralist antireductionism allows us to remain within the rubric of social thought, while doing justice to the elusive—if not ineffable—qualities of religion and other aspects of social life. It allows for a clearer analysis of social formations that trouble the boundaries of our familiar categories—for a richer, and ultimately more accurate, understanding of empirical phenomena that cannot be defined as “religious” or what-have-you. And finally, it allows for a greater appreciation of the idiosyncratic—if not unique—dimensions of the traditions we study, by enabling us to approach what the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has described as practices and beliefs that “[defy] the generalizing impulse of the sociological imagination” (Chakrabarty 2000: 83).² The analysis of such conceptual “singularities” (ibid.: 82) does not necessarily imply that the phenomena we study are “*sui generis* and unique,” but it suggests, contra Smith, that the study of “individual phenomena” may not be entirely “inconclusive” (Smith 2004a: 174). We may learn a great deal about the social world by highlighting the distinctive features of a discourse or community—lingering for a moment, as it were, on the dappled surface of one particular crab—without rushing to “class it along with something else.” And we may learn a great deal about the social sciences by resisting the drive toward classification, and acknowledging the limits of classificatory thought.

I will develop these arguments in this essay by examining the singular vision of Jewish identity advanced by the Lubavitch Hasidim, an idiosyncratic community of orthodox Jews with whom I did

² Though I will not discuss his work in detail, my approach to questions of classification has been shaped by Chakrabarty’s (2000) discussion of the tensions between “generality” and “singularity” in social and historical thought—tensions he explores by examining how South Asian perceptions of supernatural agency in the social world subvert ostensibly universal concepts like “labor” and “history.”

ethnographic fieldwork in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights from 1996 to 1998. Although they would surely not appreciate the unkosher analogy, Lubavitchers claim a collective identity much like the personal identity of James's crab. "I am MYSELF," they cry, "MYSELF alone." Their insistence upon the *sui generis*, categorical singularity of Jewishness—as well as the distinctive terms with which they articulate it—forces us to reconsider categories like religion, and may thus help us develop an antireductionist approach to social life.

LUBAVITCH HASIDIM AND THE GODLY SOUL

The Lubavitch Hasidic community—or Chabad-Lubavitch movement³—is one of a number of orthodox Jewish communities that trace their roots to a popular pietistic movement founded in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe by a mystic and teacher known as the Baal Shem Tov (literally "Master of the Good Name," a term used to describe folk healers whose therapeutic practices invoked kabbalistic names of God). Today's Hasidim may generally be distinguished from non-Hasidic orthodox Jews by their fervent devotion to charismatic leaders known as Rebbes, and by their efforts to infuse the meticulous observance of rabbinic law with an enthusiastic spirituality grounded in esoteric mystical thought.⁴ The Lubavitch community may be distinguished, in turn, from most other Hasidim by its efforts to teach Hasidic thought to a broader Jewish audience. This ethic of outreach dates to the founding of the community in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵ But as I will discuss below, it came to define Lubavitch as an organized social movement in the mid- to late twentieth century, under the leadership of the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (who led the community from 1951 until his death in 1994).

The global headquarters of the Lubavitch movement is located in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights, where many Hasidim

³ The name "Lubavitch" refers to the town in present-day Belarus where the community was centered from 1813 to 1914. The term "Chabad" is an acronym for the kabbalistic concepts *chochma*, *bina*, and *da'as* (wisdom, understanding, and knowledge), which are central terms in Chabad-Lubavitch theology.

⁴ For a brief overview of Hasidic life, thought, and history, see Mintz (1992: 1–8). For fuller introductions to the ethnographic and historical literatures on Hasidism, see Belcove-Shalin (1995), Hundert (1991), Mintz (1992), and Rapoport-Albert (1996). On the Baal Shem Tov and the origins of Hasidism, see Rosman (1996).

⁵ For the social and intellectual roots of the Lubavitch community's outreach project, see Loewenthal (1990).

settled in the 1940s and 1950s after fleeing Europe as Holocaust refugees. There are some 12,000 to 14,000 Lubavitchers in Crown Heights, where they make up a small—and predominantly White—minority in a predominantly Afro-Caribbean neighborhood.⁶ Crown Heights forms the center of a global network of Lubavitch communities and institutions. There are bustling Lubavitch communities in Los Angeles, Montreal, Buenos Aires, London, Johannesburg, Sydney, Kfar Chabad (a Tel-Aviv suburb founded by Lubavitchers), and elsewhere, as well as smaller settlements in most of the United States and dozens of other countries. All told, there are over 100,000 Lubavitchers living all around the world, forming a sprawling transnational network with Crown Heights at its spiritual and institutional core.⁷

The Lubavitch Hasidim are typically described as a “religious” community with a “religious” identity, and they adopt this category as a term of self-description at times. Indeed, they often distinguish their religious perception of Jewishness from the “ethnic” or “cultural” identities claimed by many non-observant Jews—and, as I have argued in detail elsewhere, from Black Crown Heights residents’ perceptions of their “racial” Whiteness (Goldschmidt 2006). Yet these conceptual categories ultimately fail to capture Lubavitch Hasidic understandings of Jewishness. In short, Lubavitchers see themselves, and all others they consider Jews, as the “chosen people” of an eternal God—“a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6), destined to play a unique role in the messianic redemption of creation. According to Lubavitchers, this singular people transcends the constraints of the social world, and any conceptual categories one might apply to it. There are, by definition, any number of “races,” “religions,” and “ethnic groups.” In each case, a broad range of communities are thought to share certain defining features that mark their membership in these categorical classes. Their collective identities are thus assumed to be structurally comparable—species of the genus “race,” “religion,” or “ethnicity.” But according to Lubavitchers, and many others, there can only be one true chosen people. In Lubavitch eyes, this “peculiar people” (Deut. 14:2) cannot be compared to others. Its collective identity cannot be subsumed within an overarching classificatory system.

⁶ For introductions to the Black and Jewish communities of Crown Heights, see Goldschmidt (2006), Kasinitz (1992), Mintz (1992), and Smith (1993).

⁷ Other estimates have put the world-wide Lubavitch population as high as 250,000. But this figure most likely includes non-Hasidic Jews affiliated with Lubavitch institutions, and may also be inflated by Lubavitchers for public-relations purposes. On the global network of Lubavitch communities, see Fishkoff (2003) and Hoffman (1991). On the place of Crown Heights within this network, see Goldschmidt (2000).

Of course we need not—indeed, we must not—accept such claims of singularity in an uncritical fashion. We are scholars, not stenographers, and though we often aspire to make sense of other people’s distinctive views of the world, our role is certainly not limited to transcribing their beliefs, dressing up native discourses in scholarly terms.⁸ There are, in fact, very few things less singular than the well-worn claim to be God’s chosen people. There are a half-dozen chosen peoples living in Crown Heights alone, joining Lubavitchers in a veritable chorus of singularity. And there have been countless chosen peoples over the past few thousand years, from the ancient Israelites to the United States, the apostolic church to the Puritan settlers, the Christian Identity movement to the Nation of Islam. Moreover, these claims of chosenness by no means transcend the social world. Though they are generally tied to sweeping visions of the cosmic order, they serve to link cosmology and society, supporting concrete processes of community formation, and occasionally justifying dangerous politics.⁹ I am not, therefore, arguing that we ought to accept Lubavitchers’ claims of transcendent singularity on their say-so alone. I agree with Smith when he argues, in a discussion of ancient Israelites and walnuts, that “Uniqueness is an *ordinary* presupposition of definition and classification—it is not some odd point of pride. To the degree that it has become the latter, in circles of religious scholarship, it must be set aside” (Smith 1982b: 6, original emphasis).

When we look closely, however, at Lubavitch discourses of identity, we find an understanding of Jewishness—and a set of social institutions built around this understanding—that is, in fact, unique in significant ways. Unlike most other Jews, Lubavitchers locate the essence of Jewishness in an inherited soul that sits, uncomfortably, on the boundaries of social scientific categories like “race” and “religion.” The Lubavitch community’s vision of the Jewish soul has important roots in the history of kabbalistic thought, as well as parallels in the beliefs of other Jewish communities, yet it is, I will argue, a singular vision—perhaps not entirely *sui generis*, but difficult to classify in familiar terms.

Lubavitch theology proclaims, and nearly all Lubavitchers believe, that Jews are distinguished from Gentiles by a uniquely Jewish “godly

⁸ On the complex relationships between religious studies scholars and the worldviews of the people they study, see, for example, McCutcheon (1999).

⁹ I am thinking, above all, of the links between chosenness and conquest that may be traced from the biblical text (e.g., Deut. 7) to the Puritan colonization of New England and contemporary beliefs about American exceptionalism.

soul” (in Hebrew, *nefesh elokis*) that is fundamentally different from the “animal soul” (*nefesh bahamis*) shared by all human beings. The godly soul, they believe, is a fragment, or spark, of the divine itself—of the transcendent and unknowable *Or Ein Sof*, or “Light of Infinity”—that has entered the material world, clothed in the bodies of the Jewish people.¹⁰ It is not, in fact, considered a part of the created world, but an integral aspect of the world’s creator. As Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, writes in what is arguably the central passage of his canonical text *Likutei Amarim*, or the *Tanya*, “The second soul of a Jew is truly a part of G-d above” (Schneur Zalman 1993 [1797]: 5).¹¹ The Alter Rebbe (as he is known by Lubavitchers) then goes on to explain, in the technical language of the Lurianic kabbalah,¹² how God’s *chochma*, or wisdom, descends into the created world through a complex process of emanation and self-restriction—the process described by the ten *sefirot*, or divine emanations—and comes to reside within every Jew, while remaining inextricably tied to its source.

The godly soul, like other aspects of the divine, is imagined as timeless and eternal, predating and transcending the material form of the Jewish people. But the miraculous eruption of this soul into the material world is attributed to the biblical patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The patriarchs, a Lubavitch rabbi once told me, “broke through the barrier” that separates God from the world. By subjecting themselves unconditionally to God’s will, they nullified their seemingly autonomous selves, becoming nothing more or less than instruments of godliness. They thus merited the gift of the godly soul, as well as the ability to pass that gift down to their descendants—or rather, Jacob’s descendants—in perpetuity. As the Alter Rebbe writes, in a chapter of

¹⁰ For textual and philosophical analyses of Lubavitch beliefs about the godly and animal souls, see Elior (1993: 103–124), Jacobs (1966: 103–107), Koskoff (2000: 32–34), Loewenthal (1990: 54–57), and Steinsaltz (1980: 51–65). I find it shocking, to be blunt, that some of these otherwise helpful analyses (specifically Elior, Koskoff, and Steinsaltz) never see fit to mention that Lubavitchers believe non-Jews do not have godly souls. By consistently referring to Lubavitch beliefs about “the human soul” or “the soul of man,” these scholars reinscribe the troubling equation of “Jewish” with “human” found in many classical Jewish texts (for an incisive discussion of this equation, see Wolfson [2006: 42–57]).

¹¹ Schneur Zalman’s family name was, in fact, Borukhovich. But this surname is very rarely used, by Lubavitchers or others, and he is generally identified as “Schneur Zalman of Liadi,” the town in present-day Belarus where his community was based from 1800 to 1812. For sake of convenience I will cite the edition of the *Tanya* I am using as “Schneur Zalman 1993.”

¹² I am referring here to the work of the sixteenth-century rabbi Isaac Luria (and his disciples in the Palestinian town of Safed, or Tsfat), whose interpretation of the kabbalah had an immense influence on Hasidism, and most other Jewish orthodoxies, from the seventeenth century to the present. For an intellectual biography of Luria, see Scholem (1978: 420–438). For an introduction to Luria’s complex cosmology, see Scholem (1971: 43–48, 1978: 74–76).

the *Tanya* that the last Lubavitcher Rebbe deemed so important he required all Lubavitch school children to learn it by heart:

The Patriarchs verily constituted the “Chariot” [a vehicle for godliness], and therefore they merited the blessing of transmitting to their descendants, coming after them forever, a *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama* [three aspects of the soul] from the ten holy *sefirot* [divine emanations] of the four worlds of *Atzilut*, *Beriah*, *Yetzirah*, and *Asiyah* [Emanation, Creation, Formation, and Action—intermediate levels of reality between God and creation] Thus it comes to pass that the blessed *Ein Sof* [Divine Infinity] is garbed, as it were, in the wisdom of the human [i.e. Jewish] soul, of whatever sort of a Jew he may be.” (ibid.: 75)

This, in Lubavitch terms, is the essence of Jewishness. The Jews, Lubavitchers believe, are a people chosen by God, thanks to the self-sacrifice of their patriarchs, to inherit a unique soul that somehow contains the transcendent infinity of the creator.

But the godly soul is not just a matter of kabbalistic speculation about the nature of the Jewish people. It has important implications for Lubavitch understandings of human agency, social life, and the politicized differences between Gentiles and Jews. While the animal soul is thought to motivate the selfish, worldly desires of both Gentiles and Jews, the godly soul of a Jew is thought to bend, instinctively, toward the will of God, yearning for dissolution in its divine source. Gentiles are thus thought to act entirely out of material self-interest, while Jews alone are able to transcend their selves, achieve unity with God, and act with unselfish morality. This is by no means assumed to be the spiritual state of all Jews—indeed, Lubavitchers view such self-transcendence as the product of a life-long struggle against the inclinations of one’s animal soul—but according to Lubavitchers, it is a state that Jews alone are able to achieve. Jews are thought to achieve selfless unity with God primarily through keeping the commandments of the Torah, as they are interpreted in rabbinic law. The godly soul is thus thought to endow each and every Jew—entirely regardless of their upbringing, beliefs, or religious observance—with a “hidden love” (ibid.) for God that predisposes them, whether they know it or not, to follow the commandments of the Torah.

As I have noted, this understanding of Jewishness has important sources in kabbalistic thought—in tropes and traditions that stretch back, at least, to the twelfth-century Iberian philosopher and poet Judah Halevi, who argued in the *Kuzari* that all Jews possess an innate

spiritual faculty, inherited from Adam via the patriarchs of Israel, that allows them to form a unique relationship with God (see Halevi 1964: esp. book 1, sections 27, 47, 95, 103, 115). As Gershom Scholem and others have shown, Halevi's theory of Jewish identity helped shape the views of the thirteenth-century Iberian author(s) of the *Zohar*. And so, according to Scholem, "it is in the bulk of the *Zohar* that we read for the first time [in kabbalistic tradition] of a twofold ... division of souls into non-Jewish and Jewish" (Scholem 1978: 156–157; for a more detailed discussion, see Wolfson 2006: 26–107). This ontological divide between Jew and Gentile was further elaborated in the sixteenth-century Lurianic kabbalah that formed the conceptual framework for Hasidic thought, particularly in the influential work of Hayyim Vital and Judah Loewe (on these and other early modern authors, see Wolfson 2006: 107–120). It is therefore hardly surprising that many contemporary Hasidim, and a smaller number of non-Hasidic Jews, share crucial elements of the Lubavitch community's belief in an inherited Jewish soul. Contemporary Hasidim often refer, in Yiddish, to a *Yiddishe neshoma* (Jewish soul), or a *pintele Yid* (Jewish spark, literally a "little point of Jewishness") within every Jew.¹³ Many believe, like Lubavitchers, that the spiritual flame of this *pintele Yid* continues to burn in the hearts of secular Jews. And many Hasidim imagine the Jews as a uniquely selfless and spiritual people, in contrast to the selfish materialism of the Gentiles—or, indeed, as uniquely human, in contrast to the bestial nature of the Gentiles. Non-Hasidic Jews are far less likely to reference the soul in drawing explicit contrasts between Jews and Gentiles, but some nevertheless refer colloquially to character traits like humility and compassion as attributes of a Jewish soul. In these and other ways, Lubavitch understandings of the godly soul are linked to broader patterns of Jewish self-definition.

Yet as far as I know, no other Jewish community has systematized the belief in a distinctive Jewish soul in quite the ways Lubavitchers have, placing the godly soul at the center of their immensely complex theological system, as well as their everyday discourses of Jewish identity. As Louis Jacobs notes, toward the end of a survey of Jewish beliefs about "the 'Divine Spark' in Man" from Philo of Alexandria through the present day:

In the sources mentioned hitherto the doctrine of the divine spark in the soul is accepted, occasionally with qualifications, and it forms a

¹³ For discussions of the Jewish soul from Bobover Hasidim and others in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Boro Park, see Fader (2009: chap. 2).

more or less significant part in the spiritual outlooks of the various authors. Nowhere, however, do we find such a highly developed metaphysical system based on the idea as we do in the writing of Schneur Zalman of Liady... the founder of the Habad group in Hasidism. (Jacobs 1966: 103)

The Lubavitch Hasidim thus stand alone in the significance they attribute to the Jewish soul, though the distinction between their beliefs and those of other Jews is one of degree rather than kind. More importantly, however, Lubavitchers stand alone in the social practices and institutions arrayed around their Jewish souls. Though other Hasidim may agree that Jewishness is, in some sense, a quality of the soul, none but Lubavitchers have placed this belief at the heart of a self-conscious program for identity formation.

As I noted briefly above, since the mid- to late twentieth century, the Lubavitch community has become well known, and controversial, in the Jewish world for its enthusiastic efforts to encourage orthodox observance and Lubavitch beliefs among secular and non-orthodox Jews. These “mitzvah campaigns” have been marked by full-page advertisements in the *New York Times* and other newspapers, as well as the presence of young Lubavitchers on the streets of major cities, accosting Jewish passersby—“Excuse me sir, are you Jewish?”—to encourage their observance of rabbinic law. Above all, however, these campaigns have led thousands of Lubavitchers, working as “emissaries” of their Rebbe, to found synagogues, schools, and community centers that currently serve a broad range of Jews in hundreds of communities throughout the world.¹⁴ These institutions are founded, in large part, on the Lubavitch understanding of the godly soul—on the assumption that every secular Jew already possesses the soul of a Hasid, and an innate tendency to observe rabbinic law. Lubavitch beliefs about the godly soul tend to level distinctions, or at least bridge differences, between religious and secular Jews, allowing Lubavitchers to engage with the secular Jewish world in ways that are anathema to most Hasidim. The Lubavitch community has thus incorporated thousands of “returnees” to orthodoxy since the 1960s, and, at times, Lubavitch emissaries have created innovative forms of

¹⁴ On the Lubavitch community’s outreach campaigns and their complex consequences, see Fishkoff (2003), Friedman (1994), and Hoffman (1991).

Jewish community for orthodox, non-orthodox, and secular Jews alike.¹⁵

In short, over the past fifty years, Lubavitchers have built a global social movement around the godly soul. Through their outreach campaigns and associated institutions, the Lubavitch Hasidim have worked to instantiate the Alter Rebbe's claim, in another chapter of the *Tanya* that Lubavitch school children are supposed to commit to memory, that the Jewish people are "all of a kind and all [have] one Father—therefore all Israelites are called real brothers by virtue of the source of their souls in the One G-d" (Schneur Zalman 1993 [1797]: 145). But what kind of a "kind" is this? How may we, as scholars, best make sense of Lubavitch Hasidic discourses of Jewishness? To answer these questions, as I suggested above, we must interrogate the categories of social scientific thought.

RACE, RELIGION, AND THE GODLY SOUL

The Lubavitch Hasidic understanding of the godly soul is more or less unique, and difficult to classify in familiar categorical terms. Of course a great many people, Jews and Gentiles alike, claim inherited identities of one sort or another. But aside from Lubavitchers, few imagine the medium of inheritance as a distinctive soul containing the essence of God. This soul is comparable to many other tropes of continuity, such as "blood," "soil," and "culture," but it cannot simply be equated with them, as it functions, for Lubavitchers, in a number of distinctive ways. There is, I think, nothing else quite like it. As we will see, it may certainly be described as a "racial" or "religious" perception of Jewish identity—there are good reasons to apply either, or both, of these classificatory terms.¹⁶ But as I have argued, it may best be described as a conceptual singularity that "defies the generalizing impulse of the sociological imagination" (Chakrabarty 2000: 83). I will advance my argument in this section by tracing the ties among race, religion, and the godly soul, then showing how Lubavitchers transgress these categories in their everyday discussions of Jewishness.

As I have noted, the Lubavitch Hasidim are typically described as a "religious" community. And indeed, their understanding of Jewishness

¹⁵ On "returnees" to orthodoxy, in the Lubavitch community and elsewhere, see Aviad (1983) and Davidman (1991). On Lubavitchers' relationships with both secular and non-orthodox Jews, see Fishkoff (2003), and for a particular complex example, see Ariel (2003).

¹⁶ And other terms as well, including "ethnicity" and "nation." My goal is not, however, to conduct an exhaustive survey of the available classificatory categories. Given the limitations of space, I will focus my analysis on "race" and "religion."

resonates in important ways with both scholarly and popular understandings of religion. This term is, of course, notoriously difficult to define, but Lubavitch views of the godly soul seem to fit most influential definitions. This soul is clearly imagined, by Lubavitchers, as a “spiritual being” (Tylor 1958 [1871]), bearing traces of its source in the “wholly other” (Otto 1958 [1917]). It is intimately tied to matters of “ultimate concern” (Tillich 1964), including the creation and redemption of the cosmos. According to Lubavitchers, it allows the Jewish people to interact with a “superhuman being” (Spiro 1966), and thus live in harmony with the “general order of existence” (Geertz 1973) that being has created. Moreover, Lubavitchers often tie the godly soul to other criteria of Jewishness that seem to be unmistakably religious—at least according to popular views of the term—such as ritual practice, supernatural belief, and the meticulous observance of rabbinic law. According to Lubavitchers, these practices and beliefs all stem from one’s possession of a godly soul, though they are well aware that most people thought to possess such souls do not, in fact, share them—or at least not yet. In short, there are good reasons to describe the godly soul as a religious vision of Jewish identity.

Yet despite the ties Lubavitchers tend to draw between the godly soul and certain practices and beliefs, their insistence upon the inheritance of this soul troubles the equation of religion with both ritual observance and personal faith. According to many scholars of religion—as well as the popular discourses and unstated assumptions of both Protestant Christianity and secular modernity—one’s religious identity ultimately hinges upon one’s beliefs about the supernatural world.¹⁷ Membership in a particular religion, or “faith,” is generally assumed to require a more or less conscious embrace of its central tenets, and in most cases a more or less regular participation in ritual practices thought to express those beliefs. Jewish identities, however, are often defined in genealogical, rather than ideological, terms. According to Lubavitch Hasidim, the godly soul defines the essence of all Jews by virtue of their descent from the biblical patriarchs, and regardless of their religious practices or beliefs. Lubavitchers fervently hope that every Jew will eventually embrace

¹⁷ See Lopez (1998) for a brief history of the concept of belief in Western, Christian understandings of religion. For a particularly telling scholarly example, see Talal Asad’s argument that Clifford Geertz’s influential definition of religion is “a modern, privatized Christian one because and to the extent that it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as a constituting activity in the world” (Asad 1993: 27–54, quote on 47). And see Sullivan (2005) on the privileged place of belief in American popular and legal discourses about religion.

their innate disposition to believe in God and observe his law, but their Jewishness is entirely independent of this choice. And so, for example, in the spring of 1997, I heard a Lubavitcher doing outreach work in New York City's Washington Square Park tell a self-described practicing Catholic "You're just as Jewish as the Rebbe!" when she told him her maternal great-grandmother had been a Jew. The Jewishness he was referring to is not quite a "religion," as this term is generally understood.¹⁸

Rather, this emphasis on descent resonates with contemporary understandings of "race" as an inherent and inherited quality of the self—an "innate, indelible, and unchangeable" identity, to borrow the terms with which the historian George Fredrickson distinguishes racism from religious forms of discrimination (Fredrickson 2002: 5). Moreover, the godly soul is linked by Lubavitchers to a hierarchical difference between Jews and Gentiles, and thus seems to resonate with Michael Omi and Howard Winant's influential definition of race as "a concept which... symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (Omi and Winant 1994: 55). There may, therefore, be good reasons to describe the godly soul as a racial vision of Jewish identity. Yet Lubavitch beliefs about the godly soul do not make reference to "human bodies" in any clear or consistent way. The Jewish soul certainly tends to be found in Jewish bodies—except in the complex case of potential converts to Judaism, which I will discuss below in note 23—but Lubavitchers rarely dwell on the body in defining Jewishness. In the *Tanya*, the Alter Rebbe occasionally does describe the godly soul in quasi-biological or physical terms, claiming that it resides in the brain and the right ventricle of the heart, as opposed to the animal soul which resides in the left ventricle of the heart (see e.g., Schneur Zalman 1993 [1797]: 35). These passages might be read to suggest that Jews and Gentiles have "different types of human bodies," but I rarely, if ever, heard Lubavitchers cite or elaborate on these descriptions. The embodied nature of the godly soul, to whatever extent it is imagined to have one, is by no means central to Lubavitch perceptions of Jewishness.

Nor do Lubavitchers generally rely on racialized phenotypic signs to define the boundaries of Jewishness. As I have described elsewhere, some Lubavitchers believe the godly soul exudes a kind of spiritual radiance that makes all Jews recognizable by sight (Goldschmidt 2006:

¹⁸ Lubavitchers are hardly alone among Jews in their ambivalent relationship to the concept of religion. On the inapplicability of this concept to many other Jewish identities, see Boyarin (2004) and Levitt (2008).

163–166), but most grant little credence to visible marks of identity like skin color, hair texture, or the “Jewish nose.”¹⁹ Indeed the Lubavitch community is, far and away, the most racially diverse Hasidic community, including a fair number of Hasidim from North Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America who might not be considered White by contemporary American racial standards, as well as a handful of Black Hasidim from both African-American and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds. There are, undoubtedly, racial divisions within the community—Black Hasidim, in particular, are sometimes marginalized or seen as an oddity (*ibid.*: 182–186)—but Lubavitchers generally do not assume that godly souls may only be found in one particular type of body.

Nor do Lubavitchers have a consistent biological explanation for the intergenerational transmission of the godly soul. Its embodiment in the brain may, in fact, suggest a physical mechanism of heredity, as the Alter Rebbe sometimes claims that human beings inherit physical traits through the father’s semen, which is formed in his brain (see e.g., Schneur Zalman 1993 [1797]: 7). But this patrilineal theory of heredity clearly stands in tension with the matrilineal principle of Jewish descent that Lubavitchers, like all other orthodox Jews, consider an axiomatic fact of Jewishness.²⁰ And all such theories of biological descent seem to stand in tension with kabbalistic beliefs about the transmigration of Jewish souls from generation to generation,²¹ as well as the Hasidic belief that one’s character and appearance may be shaped, in part, by one’s parents’ thoughts at the moment of conception, as well as one’s parents’ observance—or failure to observe—the laws of “family purity” governing sexuality and reproduction.²² In sum, though Lubavitchers insist on the hereditary nature of Jewishness and the intergenerational transmission of the godly soul, their distinctive views of heredity are substantially different from popular understandings of racial biology. As one Lubavitch community activist explained, when I asked him why Jewishness is only inherited matrilineally: “We’re talking about a soul—the inheritance of a soul, or a type of soul. It’s metaphysics, not genetics.”

This emphasis on “metaphysics” over “genetics”—the soul over the body, spiritual radiance over physical phenotype, transmigration over

¹⁹ On the Jewish nose, see Gilman (1991: 169–193). For a broader analysis of American beliefs about Jewish racial visibility, see Jacobson (1998: 171–200).

²⁰ On the second-century origins of Jewish matrilineality, see Cohen (1999: 263–307).

²¹ On the transmigration or “cycle” of souls (in Hebrew, *gilgul neshamot*), see Scholem (1991 [1962]).

²² For the Alter Rebbe’s thoughts on family purity and reproduction, see e.g., Schneur Zalman (1993 [1797]: 9), and for contemporary Hasidic discussions of these issues, see Fader (2009: chap. 2).

biological descent—seems to indicate a religious, rather than racial, perception of Jewishness. Yet Lubavitchers' colloquial descriptions of Jewish identity tend to shift fairly fluidly among these and other categories. The same man who said that Jewishness is a matter of "metaphysics, not genetics" also told me, bluntly, that the Jews are "a genetic and biological race. We're the seed of Abraham, most of us. We've had a few converts along the line, but we are from the seed of Abraham."²³ Yet he worked to distinguish his own racial view of Jewishness from the racial antisemitism of the Nazis, which many Hasidim, like other Jews, consider the archetypical vision of a "Jewish race." He expressed his shock that during the Holocaust, Jews were defined entirely by descent and never offered the option of conversion to Christianity. And he pointed out the tragic irony, as he saw it, that people with Jewish fathers, "who weren't even Jewish," were killed in the concentration camps alongside actual Jews. This Hasid thus imagined Jewishness as simultaneously racial and religious, yet not exactly in familiar forms—as a community of "seed" that allows for conversion, a "genetic and biological race" defined in "metaphysic[al]" terms.

Similarly, a newly orthodox Lubavitch yeshiva student navigated between racial and religious discourses in trying to define the nature of Jewishness. He argued that the uniqueness of the Jewish people cannot be explained by religion alone, because, he told me, a disproportionately large number of Nobel Prize winners have been Jews and, "That has nothing to do with Torah. That's an innate gene, so to speak—not even a gene, that's just an inbred attitude." But then, in the same breath, he went on to explain that:

The Rebbe said it's impossible for a Jew to be secular—not religious [i.e. non-observant] yes, but never secular. Secularism has nothing to do with Judaism. So even if these people [non-observant Jews] just wear Jewish stars [as jewelry], or if they just go to shul [synagogue] on Rosh Hashanah, they still go to shul. They have their sort of religion.

²³ Some scholars have argued that the possibility of conversion marks a distinction between racial and religious views of identity (e.g., Yerushalmi 1982; Fredrickson 2002). But the Jewish soul straddles these categories, allowing converts to join a community defined in genealogical terms. Converts to Judaism are traditionally granted symbolic descent from the patriarchs of Israel by taking a Hebrew name that includes the phrase "son/daughter of Abraham and Sarah." But Lubavitchers, and other Hasidim, take this claim of descent a substantial step further by describing converts as non-Jews who somehow inherited a Jewish soul. According to Hasidic understandings of the transmigration of souls, Jewish souls are nearly always reborn in Jewish bodies, but sometimes—by the inscrutable workings of divine providence—one may find its way into the body of a Gentile, who is thus drawn to Judaism. Conversion is thereby imagined as a realignment of one's "religious" commitments with one's "racially" fixed inner self.

They have that connection, and they know parts of the Torah, and they know about our forefathers—at least they're aware of them. So that, in itself, seems to be enough.

Here a new Lubavitcher raised in a non-orthodox home struggles to articulate a minimum definition of Jewishness on the conceptual boundaries of race and religion. It is “an innate gene” but “not even a gene.” It might not be “religious,” but it cannot be “secular.” It has “nothing to do with Torah” yet it rests on an “aware[ness]” of the biblical patriarchs. This complex rhetorical to-and-fro is not a result of this young Hasid's confusion. It is, I would argue, an inevitable result of his effort to express a singular vision of Jewishness in terms of reductive concepts like race and religion.

Lubavitch Hasidic understandings of Jewishness do not transcend these classificatory categories—or, for that matter, the social relations these categories help define. As I have shown in this section, Lubavitchers often do speak of race and religion when they attempt to explain their Jewishness to others. And as I have shown in detail elsewhere, their fraught relationships with their neighbors in Crown Heights are often structured in just such terms (Goldschmidt 2006). Concepts like race and religion may thus be helpful, up to a point, in an analysis of Lubavitchers' Jewish identities. But their Jewishness ultimately cannot be explained by—or reduced to—such terms. The godly soul does not transcend such categories, but it does transgress them with reckless abandon. It is part-and-parcel of the social world, but it cannot be contained by the classificatory apparatus of the modern social sciences.

THE LIMITS OF CLASSIFICATORY THOUGHT

Of course, proponents of classification in religious studies have not been blind to the complexities of phenomena like the godly soul. Indeed it would seem at first that Smith's characteristically subtle account of classification is able to accommodate such transgressive phenomena. As I noted above, Smith is deeply critical of monothetic, essentialist taxonomies in which the boundaries of classificatory categories are rigidly defined by any one privileged trait—such as an emphasis on personal faith in the case of “religious” discourses, or a concern with physical phenotype in the case of “racial” ones. He argues instead for a far more flexible vision of polythetic classification in which categories are defined by a broad range of traits, no one of which must be possessed by every member of a class (see esp., Smith 1982b:

4–5, 2000: 37; and for a detailed discussion of polythetic classification and the category of religion, see also Saler 1993). Lubavitch understandings of the godly soul might therefore be classified as a religious or racial discourse of Jewishness if the preponderance of evidence points in one or another direction, despite the fact that according to Lubavitchers, the godly soul has no necessary connection to one's beliefs about God or the shape of one's nose. Smith argues, moreover, that the boundaries of classificatory categories are necessarily somewhat fuzzy, and he seems to accept that empirical phenomena may straddle the lines between two or more classes. In a polythetic classificatory system, he recognizes, "there will always be borderline cases. Indeed, this is to be welcomed as a stimulus to further research" (1982b: 4).

This anti-essentialist, polythetic understanding of classification clearly constitutes an important step toward the social antireductionism I am advocating here. I could not agree more with Smith when he argues, in a programmatic statement of his work on classification, that "students of religion need to abandon the notion of 'essence'" and "[dismantle] the old theological and imperialistic impulses toward totalization, unification, and integration" (*ibid.*: 18). In this sense, I think, my critique of classification may overlap quite a bit with Smith's own effort to reimagine it. Indeed I should note, in all fairness, that some of the scholars I identified above as poststructuralist antireductionists have also advocated forms of polythetic classification. David Chidester argues, for example, that a process of "polythetic definition" might "minimize the structural violence that has inhered in the category of religion," by taking the concept as an open-ended "occasion for analysis" rather than an artificially stable "object of analysis" (Chidester 1996: 259–260). And again, I could not agree more with the theoretically and politically progressive goals of his argument.

Yet I worry that such efforts to reimagine—and thus preserve—classification may ultimately betray these important goals, as they continue to subsume the practices and beliefs of diverse communities throughout the world within the theoretical apparatus of the modern social sciences, however subtly this apparatus may have been retooled. There is, I would argue, an epistemological gap between our classificatory categories and our social lives that simply cannot be bridged by theoretical subtlety or "further research" (Smith 1982b: 4). While Smith clearly recognizes—indeed, he insists upon—a gap between "second-order" categories like religion and the "first-order" facts of social life (see esp., 1982a, 2004b), he continues to assume that these categories offer an adequate account of social reality. He still aspires to a thorough classification of the social world, albeit in highly sophisticated terms.

Yet many other scholars have pointed out the ineradicable limits of classificatory thought. There is, many claim, a hybrid, composite quality to cultural systems and beliefs—as well as a fluid, emergent quality to social life itself—that cannot be conveyed by the static categories of the social sciences. The literary theorist Raymond Williams has argued, for example, that “the reduction of the social to fixed forms ... remains the basic error” of too much social analysis (Williams 1977: 129). And a growing number of social scientists agree. As the sociologist Avery Gordon puts it, in a critique of dominant sociological methods:

I have been particularly troubled by the contrast between our conceptual or analytical descriptions of social systems and their far more diffused and delicate effects.... between our ability to conclusively describe the logic of [Race] or [Religion], for example, and the various experiences of this logic, experiences that are more often than not partial, coded, symptomatic, contradictory, ambiguous. (Gordon 1997: 23–24, substituting my own terms “Race” and “Religion” where Gordon refers to “Capitalism” and “State Terror”)

This is hardly a new insight, but it has gained critical force since the 1970s thanks to poststructuralist scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Scholars like Williams and Gordon have reminded us, in short, that the social world is infinitely more complex than the reductive concepts we apply to it—that while the category of religion may help scholars and others make sense of that world, no one actually has a “religious” identity.²⁴ Like Lubavitchers, we all have complex identities that may or may not be described in such terms. This is not to say that we are all just individuals—ourselves alone, as James’s crab might claim—for our lives are shaped in countless ways by classificatory categories like race and religion, and the social hierarchies such categories structure. But these categories nevertheless fail to capture the living reality of our identities and communities. In this sense, I think, we are all chosen peoples. We may not claim ties to a transcendent god, or inherited souls crafted from the essence of his being, but we all claim identities that do not quite fit the reductive terms of hegemonic categories.

²⁴ I am, of course, overstating this case a bit, as a number of sympathetic critics have reminded me. Since the early modern period, if not before, a fairly large number of people in the West and elsewhere have clearly embraced the category of “religion” and defined identities in its terms. Even in these cases, however, the “religious” dimensions of a discourse or identity can rarely, if ever, be distinguished unambiguously.

Unlike Smith and other reductionist scholars, the phenomenological antireductionists have long acknowledged an unbridgeable divide between our conceptual categories and the empirical facts of religious life. Rudolf Otto famously argued, for example, that “religion is not exclusively contained or exhaustively comprised in any series of ‘rational’ assertions” (Otto 1958 [1917]: 4). And Mircea Eliade drew on Otto, in turn, to describe the study of religion as “a meeting with the ‘foreign,’ the unknown, with what cannot be reduced to familiar categories—in short, with the ‘wholly other’” (Eliade 1984 [1961]: 3). Though I reject Eliade’s essentialist vision of religion, I largely agree with him on this crucial point. Lubavitch discourses of Jewishness may not be “wholly other” to the social world, but they constitute a form of cultural difference that cannot be easily assimilated to the classificatory apparatus of the modern social sciences, or to the dominant norms of identity formation in the United States and other Western societies. These discourses may not be entirely *sui generis*, but they “cannot be reduced to familiar categories.” Rather than trying to do so here, I have followed Eliade, up to a point, by staging an encounter with radical difference—a confrontation of sorts between the concept of religion and the Lubavitch community’s singular vision of Jewishness.

Yet scholars like Eliade have erred, I would argue, in attributing the gap between conceptual categories and empirical realities to a gap between religion and society. These antireductionists have generally accepted reductive accounts of other spheres of social life, while insisting that religion is somehow different—that religious life in particular, as the space of the sacred, stands apart from everyday social reality, and thus from the reductive categories that structure it. My analysis of Lubavitch Hasidic Jewishness strongly suggests, however, that this is not the case. As I hope I have shown, the irreducible difference, or conceptual singularity, of the godly soul takes shape within the social world. It is deeply transgressive but in no sense transcendent—lying betwixt and between familiar categories but never entirely outside of them. Its stubborn resistance to classification does not stem, as Eliade might argue, from an ineffable “hierophany” (Eliade 1963), or eruption of the sacred into the social world. Nor does it stem, in any simple sense, from the unique vision of the Alter Rebbe and the idiosyncratic community he founded. To the contrary, it stems from the institutionalization of that vision in a highly organized social movement, and from the complex place of that movement within the societies it seeks to transform.

The social antireductionism I have advocated here thus allows us to appreciate, and ultimately account for, the idiosyncratic or singular features of the complex traditions and communities we study, yet

without describing them, in James's terms, as entirely "*sui generis* and unique." It encourages us to explore the transgressive or elusive—even ineffable—dimensions of our everyday lives and imaginations, yet without attributing them to a transcendent space lying somewhere beyond the social world. It shows us, as Smith and other reductionists have argued, that religion is no different from other spheres of social life. Yet at the same time, it shows us, to paraphrase Otto, that "[the social world] is not exclusively contained or exhaustively comprised in any series of 'rational' assertions."

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