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Secular-Believing Diasporic Jews: The Grassroots Theology of Paul Simon and Leonard Cohen

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Abstract: By analyzing the musical works of Paul Simon and Leonard Cohen, this study examines the theological expressions of secular Jews in the diaspora who retain elements of belief. Drawing on contemporary theories of lived religion and post-secular spirituality, it explores how their lyrics articulate distinctive forms of Jewish spirituality outside traditional frameworks. Through a close textual analysis of their final albums, this study reveals complex theological narratives that intertwine Protestant-oriented individual spirituality with collective Jewish religious and cultural memory. The findings indicate that Cohen and Simon demonstrate distinct approaches to divinity. Cohen adopts a more traditional theistic stance, whereas Simon develops a pantheistic theology. These narratives offer viable and meaningful models for secular-believer Jewish identity and suggest possible foundations for a contemporary secular Jewish existence in the diaspora.

Keywords: Jewish diaspora; Leonard Cohen; Paul Simon; post-secular spirituality; secular Judaism; theological expression

1. Introduction

With its extensive history and intricate cultural dynamics, Jewry is a central focus in diaspora studies (Brink-Danan 2008; Weingrod and Levy 2006; Levy 2000). Anthropologists have explored how Jewish communities navigate the dual imperatives of preserving cultural identity and continuity while adapting to diverse geographical contexts. They argue that diasporic Jewishness “embeds subjectivities within identities that assert autonomous positions of culture and belonging” (Dasgupta and Egorova 2024, p. 1). Examining the North American context, Sheffer (2005) highlights the evolution of Jewish diasporic identity from a primarily religious orientation to one increasingly grounded in secular national culture, drawing parallels with other ethno-national diasporas and offering broader insights into the dynamics of diasporic formations.

The question of maintaining Jewish identity in the diaspora has gained renewed significance as increasing numbers of American Jews identify as Jews of No Religion (JNRs). According to recent demographic studies, this group constitutes 27% of American Jewry, representing the second-largest Jewish denomination after Reform Jews (Pew Research Center 2021). While this demographic shift has attracted scholarly attention, particularly regarding its implications for Jewish diasporic continuity and assimilation in the US (Amyot and Sigelman 1996; Keysar 2010), less attention has been paid to the theological dimensions of this phenomenon.

Within the JNR population, approximately 55% maintain belief in a something “beyond that which meets the eye”, whether they call it God or not (Pew Research Center 2021). These secular-believing Jews present an intriguing paradox. They identify as Jews and maintain spiritual beliefs while rejecting organized religion and Jewish religious law



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(halacha). To explore this paradox, which, like other paradoxes, becomes clearer in its context, this paper examines the grassroots theology expressed in the last albums of two prominent Jewish American singer-songwriters: Leonard Cohen and Paul Simon.

As secular-believing Jews whose work reaches millions, Cohen's and Simon's artistic expressions offer valuable insights into how contemporary Jewish identity can be conceptualized outside of traditional religious frameworks while maintaining spiritual and ethical dimensions. Through an interpretative analysis of their texts, this paper explores how their theological conceptualizations might contribute to an understanding of possible foundations for secular-believer Jewish identity in the North American diaspora.

2. Theoretical Framework

The anti-Zionist scholar Daniel Boyarin has been advocating a diasporic Jewish existence for several decades. His views are the most comprehensive in his recent publication, *The No State Solution: A Jewish Manifesto* (Boyarin 2023). Boyarin argues that "Jewishness" is neither a religion nor a state-bound nation. Instead, he sees it as a family, "blood", "shared memory", or "nation" (Uma in Hebrew). As such, it has the right and justification to seek recognition as a unique collective among many worldwide. At the same time, Boyarin argues that this status does not require geographical affiliation and should even be avoided, as linking Judaism to a geographical state is inherently racist.

Boyarin proposes a "diasporic nationality", viewing the Jewish dispersion across diverse geographies as an advantage. He envisions a Jewish culture that, like a family, is based on the self-participation of all its members and is open to accepting new individuals under given conditions. In his vision, family members maintain equitable and non-hierarchical relationships with other families, preventing the "we" feeling from becoming racist.

Boyarin's "Jewish family" centers on practices, the most important being Talmud study, which he views as "the source of all practices creating diasporic Jewish nationality". Boyarin's emphasis on practices is consistent with Judaism's focus on religious observance, whereby a person's religiosity is measured by the number and type of religious practices one observes (Cohen et al. 2003). This emphasis also corresponds with the current trend in religious studies as expressed in the *lived religion* approach. According to the school of lived religion, religious studies should focus on the religiosity of the laity as expressed in their everyday actions. Based on an analysis of a large sample of works mentioning "lived religion" or "everyday religion", Nancy Ammerman, a prominent scholar of the discipline (Knibbe and Kupari 2020), characterizes lived religion as "intentionally looking beyond institutions, beyond elites, and beyond beliefs" (Ammerman 2016, p. 99).

The practices Boyarin emphasizes are committed to halacha (Jewish religious law). He envisions masses of Jews who study the Talmud, observe the Sabbath, circumcise their sons, and are willing to accept new members only if they fulfill the conditions of conversion. As he himself admits, this is halachic *Yiddishkeit* ("the Jewish way" in Yiddish). Although Boyarin and Boyarin (1994) acknowledge in a footnote that Jewish radicals such as Kafka or Benjamin "may represent a legitimate way of realizing Judaism in the modern world despite not being observant" (p. 83) Boyarin (2023) offers no solution for non-observant Jews who cannot find their place in the synagogue.

The question of whether there can be a collective non-halachic Jewish identity in the diaspora is not only theoretical nor stemming from the fact that, for Jews in the US, being Jewish is not only about religion (Pew Research Center 2021). It is urgent because the fastest growing sector among American Jews in recent years is the Jews of No Religion (JNRs). The following section addresses this phenomenon.

3. Secular-Believer Jews

According to the Pew Survey ([Pew Research Center 2021](#)), JNRs make up 27% of American Jewry, making them the second-largest Jewish denomination after Reform Jews. The share of this sector is increasing in younger age groups. Members of the JNR sector see themselves as biologically and culturally connected to Judaism but have detached themselves from the various religious denominations and thus also from halacha. According to [Pew Research Center \(2021, p. 62\)](#), the vast majority of JNRs say that being Jewish for them is mainly a question of ancestry (41%), culture (25%), or both (15%). They associate their Jewishness primarily with the memory of the Holocaust (63%), with intellectual curiosity (49%), with an ethical and moral life (47%), and with a commitment to justice and equality in society (47%).

This sector is secular, meaning it does not identify with organized religion or its laws, nor does it seek to be bound by them.¹ Some view the expansion of this group as part of a broader American trend, where the number of “nones”—individuals unaffiliated with any religious denomination—is increasing ([Burge 2021](#)). [Amyot and Sigelman \(1996\)](#) interpret the rise in Jewish “nones” as a shift from a religiously based Jewish identity to one rooted in ethnicity. They argue that this phenomenon reflects assimilation and may also contribute to it. [Buckser \(2011\)](#), however, critiques this perspective, suggesting that framing secularization as a binary choice between the survival and dissolution of the Jewish people obscures the variability in how secularization is understood, develops, and manifests.

The fact that American “nones” do not adhere to any religious denomination does not mean that they are atheists ([Burge 2021](#); [Johnson et al. 2018](#); [Levin et al. 2022](#); [Zurlo and Johnson 2016](#)). Addressing “unchurched believers”, [Hout and Fischer \(2002\)](#) argue that most Americans who have no religious preference adhere to conventional religious beliefs despite their alienation from organized religion. According to a Pew survey ([Pew Research Center 2024](#)), about half of non-affiliated people in the US describe themselves as spiritual or state that spirituality is very important in their lives. Members of this sector are most often referred to as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR), meaning individuals who seek spiritual growth outside of institutionalized and organized religions ([Fuller 2001](#)).

However, defining the SBNR group is complicated by the fact that there is no general agreement on the meaning of spirituality. In Protestant contexts, it is often understood as personal redemption manifested in well-being and mind–body connections ([Cohen and Hill 2007](#)). Nevertheless, spirituality is an elusive concept; at times, it is regarded as a component of religion—perhaps even its most significant aspect—while at other times, it is viewed as the antithesis of religion ([Lahav 2021](#)). Furthermore, according to [Ammerman \(2013\)](#), in the US, the binary approach of “religion” and “spirituality”, reflected in the term “spiritual but not religious”, represents a political stance rather than a genuine theological or spiritual difference.

Given the limitation of the term “spiritual but not religious” and its Protestant roots and orientation ([Fuller 2001](#)), I suggest using the term “secular-believer” when discussing “spiritual” JNR, as it is more appropriate for the Jewish case. According to [Pew Research Center \(2021\)](#), 55% of JNRs believe in something “beyond that which meets the eye”, whether they call it God or not. These are the secular-believing diasporic Jews; they identify as Jews, live in the diaspora, reject religion, and yet believe in something “beyond”.

The seemingly contradictory identity of secular believers only appears paradoxical. This hybrid identity, which calls into question the assumption that one can be either secular or religious, illustrates the interest of religious studies in the overlaps between religion and secularism. These overlaps are among the central themes explored by the post-secular approach in religious studies. The post-secular approach rejects the common view of religion and secularism as binary opposites and advocates a hybrid, dialectical, fluid,

ever-changing, blurred, and open-ended view of their relationships (Mitchell 1992). This perspective also applies to other dichotomies such as (“secular”) sociology vs. (“religious”) theology, the (“secular”) public vs. (“religious”) private sphere, atheism vs. theism, and so on (Martin 1996; McLennan 2007; Glynn 1995).

3.1. Problematising Belief

Sensitivity to spiritual belief in the secular landscape brings theology into the frame. It raises questions such as what is a belief and what is its content, while asserting that not only practice but also areas such as embodiment, discourse, emotion, cognitive thought, and spirituality are intimately connected to people’s beliefs and sense of divine presence (Ammerman 2016). To address these issues, this section begins with a discussion of the meaning of the very concept of belief, followed by a discussion of the content of secular-believer Jews’ faith, focusing on perceptions of divinity.

3.2. What Is “Belief”?

Cohen and Hill (2007) argue that “religiosity”, “spirituality”, and “faith” have different meanings in different cultures (see also Needham 1972). Comparing different populations in the US, they conclude that, for Jews, religion is about community and biological lineage; their religiosity is extrinsic, emphasizing community and ritual, and important life experiences are likely to be social in nature. By contrast, religion for Protestants is about beliefs. Protestants tend to have an intrinsic religiosity that relates to personal religion, with their important life experiences likely centered on God. Cohen and Hill (2007) concluded that “the religious and spiritual identities, motivations, and experiences of Catholics and Jews are more socially and community-oriented than those of Protestants, who are more religiously individualistic” (p. 736). However, Silverman et al. (2016) assert that many Jews engage with religious beliefs via questioning and complexity.

The tension between collective and private religiosity and spirituality may be significant for secular-believing Jews in the diaspora for several reasons. First, the spirituality of the collective (Restivo 2024) is precisely what one misses when one leaves the denomination and its synagogue. Second, as North Atlantic Jews, American secular-believers experience their social and collective life in a predominantly Protestant context. In the United States, the dominant conception of religiosity is individualistic and private (Levitt 2007), as normative religion does not ground religious identity in community membership, social relationships, tradition, and ritual (Berger 1967). Cohen and Hill (2007) conclude that “the dominant strand in American Protestantism is a pietistic approach that stresses an individual’s direct relationship to God”.

The concept of “belief” among secular-believer American Jews is thus presented in the literature as a dialectical movement between “the Jewish” and “the Protestant”, the collective and the individual. In their faith, they are neither wholly collective nor wholly personal; they are both.

3.3. The Content of Belief

Even those who prioritize the study of religious practice over belief, such as the lived religion approach, recognize that the beliefs and experiences of lay people, however provisional and incoherent, nevertheless raise theological questions. Fulkerson (2012) refers to “lay people’ theology” as a “grassroots theology” that bridges the gap between professional theology and the lived experiences of people and faith communities. This approach to theology challenges the traditional Western Christian approach to systematic theology by incorporating anthropological methods and listening to unofficial voices.

[Ammerman \(2013\)](#), who conducted a multidimensional linguistic–discursive analysis of a representative sample of Christians, Jews, and neo-pagans in the US, identified two main patterns in relation to the content of belief, which she termed “theological packages”—a theistic package and a non-theistic package. Those who held the theistic package expressed three central ideas: spirituality is connected to God; spirituality involves practices aimed at developing a personal connection to God; and spirituality is related to mysterious events and encounters experienced by those who are open to them. In other words, all considered spirituality to be related to the actions of divine agent(s), practical actions to connect with the spiritual world, and openness to spiritual mysteries. By contrast, the views within the non-theistic package were concerned with various forms of transcendence and the experience of something “greater than oneself” and “beyond the ordinary”, where spirituality was located within the individual and their feelings and experiences. [Ammerman \(2013\)](#) describes this as follows:

When our participants talked about this kind of spirituality, they spoke of rising beyond the mundane and the everyday. What they were describing [. . . are] places where ordinary life is touched by an affectively charged perception that things have meaning. [. . .] What they are describing may not come from a transcendent deity, and it is certainly not supernatural, but it is nevertheless transcendent in character. (p. 269)

Despite the differences between these theological packages, [Ammerman’s \(2013\)](#) results suggest that most respondents included elements from both theological packages in their discourse.

The Pew Research Center usually divides the content of beliefs into two categories and asks respondents whether they believe in “God as described in the Bible” or in another “higher power or spiritual force”. According to its survey ([Pew Research Center 2021](#), p. 67), 7% of secular Jews believe in the first option, while 48% believe in a higher power, and 45% do not believe at all. [Pew Research Center \(2023, p. 39\)](#) found that 33% of secular-believer Jewish Americans believe in God, 56% believe in a spiritual force, and 10% were not sure or refused to answer the question.

Pew’s categorization is not unproblematic, however. For example, the reference to a “power” and a “force” in the spiritual option implies a monotheistic view of something unique, which fits transcendental theological perspectives rather than immanent ones. In the “God” option, it is unclear which Bible the question refers to. Also, in the Hebrew Bible, God is represented in more than one form, and visual representations are forbidden ([Elior 2006](#)). Furthermore, the Jewish tradition tends to interpret anthropomorphic descriptions of God metaphorically ([Silverman et al. 2016](#)), while Christians tend to take biblical descriptions literally ([Armstrong 1993](#)). [Silverman et al. \(2016\)](#) conclude that

Current ways of thinking about and assessing beliefs about God do not adequately reflect the complex culture and theology of mainstream American Jews. This inadequacy may have led to an underappreciation of the way many Jews engage with religion. (p. 119)

Based on mixed methods studies, the researchers suggest that non-Orthodox Jews hold diverse representations of God—as a benevolent personal being, as an amorphous force, and as ineffable or incomprehensible—while rejecting the image of an authoritarian personal deity. They add that compared to other religious groups in the US, Jewish conceptions of God appear to be relatively unstable and indefinite ([Silverman et al. 2016](#)).

[Lahav \(2016\)](#), who studies secular-believing Jewish women in Israel, found that about half of her interviewees adopted traditional anthropomorphic metaphors of God as a male, while the other half developed complex and creative conceptualizations of divinity and its

connection with the believer. According to her, her interviewees demonstrated the Jewish perception of faith as an ethics-based existence, which is consistent with the findings of [Pew Research Center \(2021\)](#) and [Cohen and Hill \(2007\)](#) on American Judaism.

Daphne [Hampson \(2002\)](#), a “none” theologian who left Christianity, claims that theological beliefs are metaphors or, as she calls them, “vehicles” that serve to articulate genuine human feelings about an existence that, by definition, cannot be communicated with words. These metaphors influence both our perception of the sacred and our behavior in real life. They are not an intellectual game, but a constructive element of social life. Better understanding the beliefs of secular-believing Jews in North America will not only enrich our knowledge of this sector but will also provide Jews who refuse to adhere to halacha with a basis for their existence as Jews in the diaspora. With this in mind, this study asks the following question: What are the grassroots theologies of secular-believing North American Jews?

4. This Study

To investigate the research question, this study conducts an interpretive textual analysis of the lyrics of the last two albums by two Jewish American singer-songwriters, Leonard Cohen and Paul Simon. These artists are perceived as North American Jewish secular believers; i.e., they belong to the 55% of JNRs (Jews of No Religion) who believe in God (as described in the Bible or in a higher power) but do not feel they belong to any religious Jewish denomination ([Pew Research Center 2021](#)).

The singer-songwriter—an artist who performs their own compositions—is a key figure in American music. The songs of singer-songwriters are often seen as simultaneously personal and universal, reflecting intimate perspectives while resonating with broader experiences that allow fans to connect deeply with the music ([Shuker 2005](#)).

Leonard Cohen and Paul Simon are two of the most notable Jewish singer-songwriters,² and in this study they are examined not only as narrators of their own experiences but also as voices for the many who identify with and admire them.

Leonard Cohen (1934–2016) was born in Montreal to an Orthodox Jewish family. In his youth, he studied Judaism; later, he also learned Christianity and practiced Zen Buddhism for many years ([Simmons 2012](#)). The academic literature on Cohen is extensive, with much of it devoted to the religious dimensions of his work. For example, Kabbalah scholar Elliot [Wolfson \(2006\)](#) analyzed Cohen’s texts through a Kabbalistic lens, while D. [Cohen \(2016\)](#) examined the prayers in his writings, and [Freedman \(2024\)](#) explored the mystical sources in Cohen’s poetry. [Pally \(2021\)](#) has argued that Cohen’s writings reflect a tension between two central theological categories: the covenant, grounded in the covenant of his Jewish tradition, and theodicy.

Cohen’s last two albums,³ *Popular Problems* and *You Want It Darker*, illustrate his enduring creativity. Released in 2014 at the age of 80, *Popular Problems*, Cohen’s 13th studio album mostly contained new songs but also some reworked versions of earlier recordings. His last studio album, *You Want It Darker*, was released on 21 October 2016—just 17 days before his death. For *You Want It Darker*, Cohen collaborated with the cantor and choir of the Shaar Hashamayim Synagogue in Montreal, which he attended as a child ([Remnick 2016](#)).

Paul Simon was born in 1941 into a Jewish family who immigrated from Hungary and grew up in Queens, New York. He first rose to fame as part of the duo Simon and Garfunkel and began his solo career in the 1970s. Simon is widely regarded as one of the most successful singer-songwriters in pop and rock music and a pioneer in the popularization of “world music” in the American mainstream ([Perone 2000](#)).

In contrast to Cohen, Simon has only been the subject of relatively limited scholarly research. Most studies focus on his controversial decision to circumvent the cultural

boycott of apartheid South Africa in the 1980s (e.g., [Meintjes 1990](#)). Simon's songwriting is characterized by his understated style and focus on the small, poignant moments of life ([Bennighof 2007](#))—qualities that are distinctly different from the grandeur often associated with Cohen's work. In a *Rolling Stone* profile, Simon's music was described as a constant search for the America of his childhood, depicting scarred but resilient people dealing with life's disappointments ([Dawidoff 2011](#)). Simon himself said he wanted to "write pictures you can't see" ([Gibney 2023](#)).

Simon's two most recent albums—*In the Blue Light* (2018) and *Seven Psalms* (2023)—offer different creative approaches. *In the Blue Light*, his 11th studio album, contains reworked versions of 10 of his older songs. By contrast, *Seven Psalms* is a thematic album with seven interconnected tracks—or "psalms"—that deal with love, faith, and death in a moving yet restrained way. The album has been described as "a Jewish liturgical work" ([Salkin 2023](#)). In a documentary about the making of the album ([Gibney 2023](#)), Simon revealed that the inspiration for the album came from a dream, in which he came to understand that the creation of the album was his mission.

5. Findings and Discussion

Could something in the "grassroots theology" proposed by Cohen and Simon serve as a basis for a diasporic Jewish identity for secular believers in North America? To address this question, this section examines their concept of belief, their perceptions of God, and their use of religious and ethnocultural symbols.

5.1. The Concept of Belief

In his last two albums, Leonard Cohen describes the world as full of suffering. He does not deny the agony nor try to explain evil away. The people cry "for mercy from the bottom of the pit" (L. [Cohen 2014d](#)), and the "burden's heavy as you will it through the night" (L. [Cohen 2014e](#)). One lives life "alone on the road" (L. [Cohen 2014b](#)), broken, lame, and ashamed. On the cusp of death, Cohen describes life as hard and painful, confessing that "I'm angry and I'm tired all the time" (L. [Cohen 2016d](#)).

Suffering also appears in Simon's texts, albeit in a less dramatic and poetic style. While Cohen primarily sees the pain in the world, Simon also notices the beauty. But he too is aware that "Most folks' lives Oh, they stumble Lord / / they fall through no fault of their own. Most folks never catch their stars / / [...] they] Gaze out from a window to a wall" ([Simon 2018c](#)); "Driving through the darkness" ([Simon 2023f](#)); and asking themselves "Who am I in this frightened world? Where will I make my bed tonight when twilight turns to dark?" ([Simon 2018b](#)). "We're only here for a season of sunlight", writes Simon, "Two billion heartbeats and out" ([Simon 2023f](#)).

Against this background, both artists turn to God and embark on a spiritual journey to come to terms with the pain in the world. The spiritual journey described by Cohen is the story of a romance ([Pally 2021](#)), a love story where the beginning held a promise of redemption. L. [Cohen \(2014b\)](#) writes:

I was born in chains
But I was taken out of Egypt [...]
Lord, I can no longer keep this secret
Blessed is the name
The name be praised.

And so, "What my life would seem to me if I didn't have your love to make it real?" (L. [Cohen 2016a](#)), because "You were my ground, my safe and sound, you were my aerial" (L. [Cohen 2016d](#)). However, this idyllic state of love and redemption does not last long

(L. Cohen 2014c). Cohen's story is not one of triumphant love. Ultimately, "your love was so confusing [...] that] I let you go" (ibid.). It is a story of a broken love that "I followed very closely, but my life remained the same." Despite the belief in redemption from suffering, Cohen recounts, "I've heard the soul unfolds in the chambers of its longing [...] But all the ladders of the night have fallen" (L. Cohen 2014b). Redemption, which seemed to be within reach, slipped away, and the soul returned to its realm of suffering.

An analysis of Simon's relationship with God through his lyrics also reveals a complex and often ambivalent spiritual journey. Simon's words reveal a constant struggle with faith, doubt, and the search for meaning. He writes, "I lived a life of pleasant sorrows" (Simon 2023a), and "I heard a racket in the hall, I thought I heard a call, but I never opened up my door" (Simon 2018a) until "the real deal" broke him, "like a twig in a winter gale" (Simon 2023a). This is a moment of spiritual reckoning that contrasts with his earlier indifference. In the place where "doubt and reason dwell" (Simon 2023a), he imagines a jury deliberating on existential questions and deciding between despair and hope, in which "All is lost, or all is well . . .". These, Simon writes, "are questions for the angels [...]. Who believes in angels? Fools do. Fools and pilgrims all over the world", like himself, "a pilgrim on a pilgrimage walked across the Brooklyn Bridge", praying and waiting (Simon 2018b). Simon's spiritual exploration becomes even clearer when he writes:

So here I am, Lord,
I'm knocking at your place of business
And I know I ain't got no business here
But you said if I ever got so low I was busted
You could be trusted.

This plea reveals Simon's vulnerability, indicating a longing for divine intervention. He expresses a sense of divine, purposing that "The sunlight written in a scrawl. The gift that God intended for us all". He appeals to God to "Soothe me, cool my fever high, release my tears and let me cry, I need it so much".

From the description so far, it is clear that both Cohen and Simon embody a privatized religiosity, which focuses on the personal relationship between the believer and their deity. This is evident, for example, in the conceptualization of spirituality as a journey—most clearly in Simon's work—and as a narrative of broken love in Cohen's work. Such personalization of faith exists in the Jewish tradition like Hebrew biblical Psalms. However, in the context of current America, Cohen and Hill (2007) see it as a manifestation of the "Protestant view" and distinguish it from the Jewish (and Catholic) perspective that tends to emphasize on social relationships and ethical practice.

5.2. The Concept of God

Theologically speaking, in the Secular Age (Taylor 2007) of the West, the modernist refusal to accept suffering as a given poses two major challenges to the Abrahamic religions. The first challenge is ontological—the assertion that there is no transcendent supreme being who created and controls all things and who should be worshiped and obeyed, namely God (Anderson 1998). The second challenge is of a theodicy nature. It focuses on the attempt to make sense of evil or suffering if one believes that God not only exists but is also omnipotent and omnibenevolent (Kessler 2006).

Lahav (2019) suggests that there are three types of theological responses to the atheistic and the theodicy challenges: traditional (theistic) responses that seek ways to preserve belief in the normative God; secular (atheistic) responses that reject the concept of God and his existence altogether; and post-secular (ex-theistic) responses that refute the existence of God as described in the scriptures but seek new articulations of what is perceived as

the true presence of divinity (either transcendent or immanent) in the world. Following this typology, this section aims to demonstrate that Cohen's grassroots theology is more traditionally theistic, while Simon takes a post-secular, ex-theistic, pantheistic approach.

Since, according to Cohen, the world is harsh and painful, and God is the glorious agent, the "dealer" and the "healer" who should be "magnified" and "sanctified" (L. Cohen 2016e), the disappointed believer who has "followed closely" but whose life has "remained the same" (L. Cohen 2014b) must face both challenges—the atheistic undermining of the very existence of God and the theodicy challenges.

The first ontological challenge worries Cohen less. As Pally (2021) notes, "Cohen's problem was not a crisis of faith—he never ceased believing in God—but the scandal that God makes it so hard for us to live by our beliefs" (p. 4). The disappointed lover then writes, "I'm so sorry for that ghost I made you be, only one of us was real and that was me" (L. Cohen 2016d), but in speaking to what was "not real", there is, of course, acknowledgment of its existence. This is why he speaks with ironic mockery of "the great professor of all there is to know" who says, "There is no God in heaven and there is no hell below" (L. Cohen 2014a). Furthermore, Cohen implies that he has invested so much time and personal resources in faith that he cannot abandon ship at this late stage, even if it sinks: "It seemed the better way when first I heard him speak, now it's much too late to turn the other cheek" (L. Cohen 2016b).

Compared to the relatively brief and light treatment of God's existence in the world, the theodicy challenge preoccupies Cohen considerably (Pally 2021). He wrestles with the persistence of personal suffering despite his attempts to cling to the sublime through two arguments: defining himself as a sinner and defining God as evil.

As a sinner—a term Cohen uses multiple times to describe himself—he remains within the framework of traditional monotheistic theodicy, which attributes suffering to personal sin (Kessler 2006). Within this tradition, Cohen writes, "all my teachers told me I had myself to blame". According to Dan (1997), the concept of personal sin is more dominant in Christianity than in Judaism. For example, Deuteronomy and the Jewish biblical prophets conceptualize sin as collective wrongdoing rather than individual failing. Moreover, the Book of Job asserts that this world's suffering is not necessarily the result of sin but rather part of an incomprehensible divine plan that must be accepted without question.

However, Cohen violates both traditional Christian and Jewish theodicy when he blames God for suffering and portrays him as the one who "wants it darker" (L. Cohen 2016e). God, Cohen claims, "touched on love, then he touched on death". He refers to "a million candles burning for a help that never came" (L. Cohen 2016e) and advises himself to do the same:

Steer your heart past the truth that you believed in yesterday
Such as fundamental goodness and the wisdom of the way
[. . .] Steer your way through the pain that is far more real than you
That smashed the cosmic model, that blinded every view
And please don't make me go there, though there be a God or not. (L. Cohen 2016c)

Another version, perhaps characterized more by pity than anger, suggests that this is a broken god: "You showed me where you had been wounded, in every atom broken is the Name" (L. Cohen 2014b). Even though God is not portrayed as evil here, this perception departs from the classical monotheistic view by presenting a weak, wounded, passive, and powerless God. Such an image of a wounded deity is embodied in Christianity by the figure of Jesus, but these characteristics are not usually attributed to God the father himself, certainly not in mainstream Judaism (Dinor 2023).

Cohen's deep conviction of God as a deity who rules the world contrasts with the Orthodoxy of the (Boyarin and Boyarin 1994), who write that when they pray in the synagogue for the health of a sick friend, "it is not because we, skeptics like us, believe in the efficacy of Jewish prayer (and no matter how hard we try), but because this is the way Jews express their solidarity with sick people" (p. 92). It seems that Cohen, the unaffiliated Jew, is really expecting God's help. In the terms of Lahav (2019), he expresses "a theistic response" to the modern challenge of religiosity. With the exception of the assertion of the "evil God", Cohen does not go beyond official, traditional dogma and retains belief in a transcendent deity. This tendency is consistent with Lahav's (2016) findings that about half of the secular-believers she studied in Israel hold a traditional understanding of God.

Paul Simon, on the other hand, openly acknowledges the ontological-atheistic challenge of religiosity and admits, "I have my reasons to doubt" (Simon 2023f). He asks, "Are we all just trial and error? One of a billion in the universe?" (Simon 2023c) and longs for belief: "I want to believe [...] I need you here by my side, my beautiful mystery guide" (Simon 2023e). In several songs, Simon describes a worldly, godless reality, "just an apartment house", in which "One man's ceiling is another man's floor" (Simon 2018a). In "The Teacher" (Simon 2018d), not only is the world without redemption, but even spiritual leaders, whose "wards are like the tablets of stone", promise to guide their followers "To navigate the sea of sadness, to shield the fragile mind from madness". But these promises are empty, leaving "the remnants of charred photographs" as their only legacy. The teacher, buried under rubble, is mocked by the wind as it reads his words (Simon 2018a).

Simon offers multiple descriptions of God, including "my engineer", "the earth I ride on", "the face in the atmosphere", "the path I slip and slide on"; "a virgin forest", "a forest ranger", "a meal for the poorest of the poor", "a welcome door to the stranger"; "The Covid virus is the Lord", "a terrible swift sword", "a simple truth surviving"; "The Lord is a puff of smoke", "my personal joke", "my reflection in the window"; "The Lord is my record producer", "the music I hear deep in the valley, elusive"; and "Is the coast and the coast is clear". God "turns music into bliss, my beautiful mystery guide" (Simon 2023c).

The abundance of metaphors used by Simon opens up a broad spectrum of theological meanings. He frequently refers to nature (for example, a forest, the ocean, the earth, the COVID-19 virus), reflecting a pantheistic theology that identifies the divine with nature and ascribes an immanent divinity to all aspects of creation (Kessler 2006). Although pantheism diverges from classical monotheism, pantheistic ideas have existed on the fringes of Judaism for centuries. Examples include Spinoza's concept that identifies God with nature (Biale 2010), the Kabbalistic teaching "There is nothing else but God" (Idel 1988), and 20th century Jewish philosophers such as A.D. Gordon (Lahav 2014).

Simon's pantheistic view coincides with what Lahav (2019) describes as the post-secular or "ex-theistic" response to the challenges of modernity to religion. For the post-secular response, "the 'secular murder' of the monotheistic, traditional God does not mean the loss of sacredness, but rather opens the door to present new understandings of divinity that are not cauterized by institutionalized religion and at the same time resist spiritual void" (p. 169). This approach reflects the tendency of secular Jews in the US to believe in a nebulous notion of God as a "spiritual force" (48%) rather than as a figure depicted in the Bible (7%) (Pew Research Center 2021, p. 67). It is also consistent with Silverman et al.'s (2016) argument that non-Orthodox Jewish conceptions of God are relatively unstable and indeterminate. Lahav's (2016) research on secular-believing Jews in Israel shows a similar trend in which people create a range of non-traditional root theologies, including pantheistic theologies.

In addition to metaphors that evoke transcendence ("The Lord is a forest ranger" or "my beautiful mystery guide" (Simon 2023c)), Simon also integrates ethical dimensions ("The Lord is a meal for the poorest of the poor, a welcome door to the stranger" (Ibid)).

This orientation is consistent with the Jewish emphasis on religion as a social rather than individual endeavor (Cohen and Hill 2007) and with the association of Judaism with ethical living among secular Jews in the United States (Pew Research Center 2021). It also reflects the ethical emphasis found by Lahav (2016) in studies of secular-believing Jews in Israel. At the same time, Simon uses journey-related metaphors for God (“The Lord is the path I slip and slide on”, “the train I ride on” (Simon 2023c)) that are more characteristic of North Atlantic Protestant views (Taylor 2003) than Jewish perspectives.

5.3. Religious Symbolism

When examining the religious symbols that Cohen and Simon use in their works, it is noticeable that it generally plays a greater role in Cohen’s work than in Simon’s. Cohen often refers to narratives from sacred texts, especially from the Hebrew Bible (e.g., the sin of Eden, the Exodus, Samson between the pillars) and from the New Testament (the water into wine), using words with religious connotations (e.g., *hineni* in Hebrew, *mea culpa* in Latin, and “born again” and “salvation” in English).

Cohen’s religious references contain numerous Jewish elements. For example, he quotes the opening words of the Jewish memorial prayer Kaddish (“magnified”, “sanctified”—in Aramaic, *yitgadal ve’yitkadash*) and uses Jewish expressions such as “the Name” to address God and phrases such as “bless is the Name” (*baruch hashem*). He also alludes to ethnic and biological components. Echoing the significant role that the memory of the Holocaust plays in the Jewish identity of secular American Jews (Pew Research Center 2021), Cohen refers to the Holocaust and the experiences of Jews and Romani people (L. Cohen 2014a). He also mentions the biblical concept of Israel’s election (to be God’s chosen people), one of the historic beliefs of Judaism (Kessler 2006). Recent studies show that about 50% of American Jewry believe that “Jews are the ‘chosen people’ as described in the Bible”, while 18% do not believe this, and 32% say they do not know (Inbari and Bumin Forthcoming). Cohen reflects this ambiguity when he writes, “My father says I’m chosen, My mother says I’m not” (L. Cohen 2014a).

Cohen frequently uses Christian symbolism too, perhaps most clearly in his focus on love and on the relationship between God and the believer. Many of his songs can be interpreted either as love songs to God or as romantic songs to a beloved woman (Pally 2021). The emphasis on love in Christianity, perhaps best expressed in the assertion that “God is love”, resonates strongly in Cohen’s work, such as in the line “I wish there was a treaty between your love and mine” (L. Cohen 2016d). Cohen also refers to the New Testament (e.g., “turning the other cheek”) and uses key Christian theological concepts such as “the fall” of man and the born-again sinner (ibid.).

Furthermore, Cohen’s depiction of a weakened or broken God with phrases such as “broken is the name”, “you were wounded in every atom” (L. Cohen 2014b), or “he died to make men holy” (L. Cohen 2016c) directly reflects the image of Christ (“crucified in the human frame” (L. Cohen 2016e)) and deviates significantly from Jewish depictions of the divine. While the Christian God is embodied, the traditional Jewish God remains eternally transcendent. Thus, as other scholars have observed (e.g., Pally 2021), Cohen mixes the Jewish and Christian imaginary.

Although Simon’s latest album *Seven Psalms* (2023) undoubtedly refers to the Hebrew Bible, his use of religious symbolism is more restrained compared to Cohen. He ends the album with the religious word Amen, a term with almost identical meaning in Hebrew and English, and frequently invokes “the Lord”, a religious term common in both English and Hebrew (*Adonai* in Hebrew). Perhaps he is referring to Cohen’s song “Hallelujah” as well as the Hebrew Bible when he writes of “The sacred harp that David played to make his songs of praise” (Simon 2023d). The sentence “Hoping that the gates won’t be closed

before your forgiveness” (Simon 2023f) echoes a prayer from Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement.

However, Simon’s religiosity is implied rather than explicit. Simon, for example, refrains from mentioning hell or sin against God, but he repeatedly refers to heaven, as in “Heaven is beautiful, It’s almost like home”. As in Lahav’s (2016) study, it is likely that Simon’s use of heaven is metaphorical and not an expression of a literal belief in an afterlife. The emphasis on heaven over hell is consistent with the trend among American “Nones” (Pew Research Center 2024) and American Jews (Pew Research Center 2021), who are more likely to believe in heaven rather than hell.

Although he uses relatively little religious symbolism, Simon draws heavily on images from nature. He speaks of earth and atmosphere, fields and stars, flowers and forests. This emphasis on nature underlines, as already mentioned, a pantheistic understanding of the divine. The references to nature are paired with frequent allusions to music, as in “The thought that God turns music into bliss” (Simon 2023d). Taken together, these elements suggest that the term “spiritual but not religious”, with its clear distinction between spirituality and religiosity, applies more to Simon than to Cohen. While Cohen’s religiosity is as distinct as his spirituality, Simon’s “theological package” fits comfortably into what Ammerman (2013) calls the non-theistic package that characterizes the spiritual.

Another aspect of Simon’s symbolism is a general longing for childhood and home, in which spirituality is an integral and natural part, as in “I’m a child again, entwined in your love, in your light, in your cool summer shade” (Simon 2023a). These images, as already mentioned, combine with an ethical dimension in Simon’s perception of the divine. He sings of refugees and the persecuted, shows empathy for the weak, and refers to mutual aid, which is consistent with the Jewish emphasis on ethics and morality (Cohen and Hill 2007), as well as the Protestant principle of charity. Unlike Cohen, Simon’s social engagement does not refer specifically to Judaism, but it does carry a “Jewish scent” of humor and the wisdom of the outsider. This sentiment is expressed, for example, in his description of life as a communal home, where “one man’s ceiling is another man’s floor” (Simon 2018a) and in “My Professional Opinion” (Simon 2023b), where he writes:

So all rise to the occasion
or all sink into despair
In my professional opinion
We’re better off not going there.

6. Conclusions

Anthropological theories of diaspora have shifted focus from assimilation processes to examining how diasporic communities create new cultural formations, exploring themes such as hybridity, nostalgia, and nationalism (Vora 2018). Anthropological studies of Jewish culture provide a more nuanced understanding of Jewish secularization beyond a simple survival vs. dissolution dichotomy (Buckser 2011).

The analysis of Cohen’s and Simon’s grassroots theologies, or their theological vehicles in Hampson (2002) terms, reveals two different ways of articulating secular-believing Jewish identity in the North American diaspora. Cohen’s approach, rooted in traditional theistic beliefs while challenging Orthodox theodicy, shows how one can maintain strong connections to Jewish religious symbolism and narratives even without institutional affiliation. His work suggests that the rejection of organized religion need not entail the rejection of traditional Jewish theological concepts. Simon, on the other hand, offers a more radical theological innovation with his pantheistic orientation and emphasis on immanent

divinity. He shows how Jewish identity can be maintained through ethical commitments and cultural sensibilities while fundamentally reconceptualizing the divine.

The works of both artists reflect the hybrid character of secular Jewish identity in North America. Their theological expressions blend typically Jewish elements—such as ethical emphasis, communal responsibility and specific cultural references—with Protestant-influenced characteristics such as individualized spirituality and personal religious journeys. This hybridity suggests that rather than seeing secular believers as evidence of assimilation or dissolution of Jewish identity, we should understand them as forms of Jewish cultural expression adapted to contemporary North American realities.

These findings call into question Boyarin's insistence on halakhic practice as the basis for Jewish identity in the diaspora. While Boyarin rightly points to the importance of shared cultural traits and collective memory, Cohen and Simon's work demonstrates that such sharing can occur through channels other than religious law—in particular through shared spirituality, theological struggle, ethical orientation, and cultural sensitivity. Their tremendous popularity also suggests that such alternative articulations of Jewish identity can resonate strongly with secular-believing Jews who feel alienated from traditional religious frameworks.

Looking forward, this study suggests the need for broader recognition of diverse paths to Jewish diasporic identity. Rather than seeing the rise in secular believers as a threat to Jewish continuity, their theological innovations might be understood as creative adaptations ensuring Judaism's continued relevance in contemporary contexts. Future research might explore how such theological innovations translate into communal practices that could support secular-believing Jewish identity while maintaining meaningful connections to Jewish tradition and collective memory.

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Notes

- ¹ Jews who identify as non-religious (JNRs) are not the only secular Jewish population. In Israel, approximately 45% of Jews identify as secular, reflecting the secular orientation of the Zionist movement that established the State of Israel (Lahav 2021). The case of Israel, where the Jewish identity is protected by the state, lies, however, beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on the Jewish diaspora in the United States.
- ² This article does not address other Jewish singer-songwriters such as Bob Dylan or Lou Reed, as their identity-related connections to Judaism are very complex and warrant a separate study (Griffin 2014).
- ³ The study does not include in its analysis the album *Thank You for the Dance*, which is a compilation of unreleased recordings from Cohen's lifetime, curated by his son, Adam, after Cohen's death.

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