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ABRAHAM ISAAC KOOK'S  
ACCOUNT OF 'CREATIVE EVOLUTION':  
A RESPONSE TO MODERNITY FOR THE SAKE OF ZION

Daniel R. Langton\*

ABSTRACT: The Chief Rabbi of Israel and religious Zionist Abraham I. Kook is well known for having written about evolution. His mystical interpretation of the theory is often presented as a synthetic or complementary model that effectively offered a defence of Judaism in the context of the religion-science debate. But this is not the only context in which one might consider his views on the topic. From a political perspective, one might note his interest in the influence of Darwinism in the thought of secular Jews. And if one gives due weight to his appreciation of secular Zionists' work in building up the Land and combines this with his earlier, often overlooked writings on evolution in which the mystical dimension is missing, then it is possible to suggest that his engagement with evolutionary theory reflected as much a political concern to build bridges between religious and non-religious Zionists as it expressed a theological defence of traditional Judaism against the challenges of modern science.

Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) was the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, a position he held during the pre-State Mandate period 1919-1935, and the most influential leader of religious Zionism at that time. Strictly speaking, Kook was not primarily interested in biological evolutionary theory and certainly not Darwinian natural selection despite the fact that he is probably the Jewish religious authority best known for having engaged positively with evolution. Rather than the directionless, chance-driven theory of natural selection, Kook's interest in evolutionary theory was actually as a philosophical theory of progress. According to most commentators on Kook, including Shai Cherry, the chief authority on the matter,<sup>1</sup> he approached the subject through the prism of a mystical conception of ascent in an attempt to maintain the integrity of Jewish tradition in the face of the challenges of modernity. He sought to reassure anxious co-religionists that evolutionary theory posed no threat to Judaism but rather conformed to existing kabbalistic teachings about cosmic evolution and a progressive world. To achieve this end, Kook attempted to present mystical and scientific understandings of evolution as complementary to each other. What has been left out of this account, however, is the role of Zionism. In what follows it will be argued that there were actually two stages to Kook's

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<sup>1</sup> Shai Cherry, 'Three Twentieth-Century Jewish Responses to Evolutionary Theory', *Aleph* 3 (2003). This is derived from his wider survey of Jewish engagement with evolution: Michael Shai Cherry, 'Creation, Evolution and Jewish Thought' (Doctoral thesis, Brandeis University, 2001).

thought, and that political considerations, as much as any theological ones, are necessary for understanding his interest in the subject.

Kook's influence and appeal as a traditionalist religious leader was in large part due to the seriousness with which he engaged with the challenges of modernity and secularism. This applied in particular to secular Zionism, to which many religious Jews, whether Zionist or non-Zionist, were implacably opposed. Kook, however, adopted a controversial position on the subject. Almost immediately after becoming Chief Rabbi of Jaffa in 1904 Kook argued in a newspaper article that the secularists' underlying national and ethical idealism was, for him, an expression of a fundamentally religious urge. He suggested that the Talmudic claim that the Messiah would arrive in a generation that was entirely guilty or entirely innocent (Sanhedrin 98a) could be understood to mean that the generation in question would be neither guilty nor innocent, but both at the same time. This, he argued, applied to those anti-religious Zionist pioneers who did not themselves appreciate that their motives were subconsciously religious ones; after all, the *chalutzim* demonstrated great idealism and self-sacrifice in attempting to realize what was the traditional messianic goal of a just and equal society and who called for the ingathering of the exiles.<sup>2</sup> In a letter dated 1912 he discussed secularism as one of several forces at work in the Land trying to build institutions according to their own philosophies. After criticizing secularist Zionists for having 'renounced everything holy' and for destructively distracting settlers in *Eretz Yisrael* from God and his Holy Torah, he went on,

But there is no denying that together with this there is also some important element that sustains life: a strong love for the nation and a clear and firm goal to develop the practical aspect of the settlement in *Eretz Yisrael*, to strengthen the national historic spirit of this generation toward attachment to the land and the people. With all its alienation [from tradition], there remains in this group a very powerful spark of holiness that is worthy of being activated by the efforts of the faithful ...<sup>3</sup>

His advice to his fellow religious Zionists was to engage with the secularists so as to 'minimise the destructive effects which it causes' and to 'try to arouse the holy spirit of Jewish people that is in the hearts of all the children of Jacob in whatever way it is possible.'<sup>4</sup> He would articulate this kind of defence of the godless secular Zionists up until his death in 1935. Even that year, he wrote a newspaper article in which he countenanced patience with the *chalutzim* who should be regarded as valued workers rebuilding the Land, for there would be plenty of time to apply traditional standards of religious piety once their work was completed and Palestine had become a Jewish commonwealth.<sup>5</sup>

It seems that Kook's sympathy for the secularists stemmed in large part from his particular understanding of the crisis of modernity in Western culture, which had alienated these Jews from their religious traditions. In *Orot Ha-Kodesh* [Lights of Holiness],

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham Isaac Kook, 'Hador', *Ikkevei Hatzon* (1904), cited in Tamar Ross, 'What Would Rav Kook Have to Say About the State of Israel Today?', in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz (New York, London: New York University Press, 1995), 303-304.

<sup>3</sup> Open letter to Agudat Yisrael conference (1912) in Abraham Isaac Kook and Ben Zion Bokser, *The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook* (New York: Amity House, 1988), 116-119.

<sup>4</sup> Open letter to Agudat Yisrael conference (1912) in *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Isaac Kook, *Ha-Hed*, Elul 1935, cited in Samuel Higo Bergman, 'On Reality in God', in *Essays on the Thought and Philosophy of Rabbi Kook*, ed. Ezra Gellman (New York: Cornwall Books, 1991), 84.

a three-volume collection of essays published posthumously in 1963-64, he would later explain that the crisis in 'man's outlook' that had brought about 'confusion and disorder' to wider society, had been caused by several factors. Of these, the theory of evolution was highlighted for having 'wrought a major revolution'.<sup>6</sup> One possible response to this situation would have been to condemn the theory and those secularist Jews who held to it, as did many of Kook's co-religionists, of course. But, as we shall see, Kook did not do this. After all, secular Jews identified closely with Western secular culture, and evolutionary theory was one of the foundational truths of that culture, so to attack it in the name of Judaism would be to alienate secular Jews further from Judaism. If the theory lay at the root of the confusion, and if one hoped to bring secular Jews back to Jewish tradition, then one ought to adopt a more tolerant, conciliatory attitude towards it. To convince his co-religionists of the desirability of this, however, Kook needed to show that either the theory was compatible with Jewish faith and that one should regard it as an opportunity for debate, or that Judaism taught an even more powerful version of the theory. Arguably, one can trace two stages in Kook's thought on the matter, which roughly correlate with these positions.

The earliest direct reference Kook made to evolution can be found in *Li-Nevuchei Ha-Dor* [For the Perplexed of this Generation], written around 1900. In this work he rejected the idea that evolution challenged religion, and suggested rather that an understanding of the time and complexity of evolution would only increase our admiration and appreciation of God's creation of species. As he explained,

Evolution that comes with great gradualness, milliards of years, is what agitates the hearts of the small-minded. They think that evolution is a reason to deny the existence of the living God, but they are greatly mistaken ... When we see the great creation and how it is arranged according to laws of wisdom, and the ways of all living things in their bodies and minds and intelligence and how all is arranged in a single system, then we recognize the great Spirit present here, which gives life to everything and makes all possible. And if the ways of wisdom compel [us to acknowledge] that this came to pass through evolution over myriads of myriad of years, we feel the utmost wonder at how great and exalted is God the Eternal, that myriads of years working constantly to produce a desired end, are reckoned as naught or a instant.<sup>7</sup>

After all, Kook went on,

What is the difference between the evolution of the globes of the stars and the worlds according to their size over myriads of years, and the evolution of the fetus within its mother over months? And yet we understand that 'Wondrous are Your deeds and my soul surely knows ... that I was created in a secret place [and] formed in the very bottom of the earth, Your eyes have seen my unformed substance and in Your book all shall be written.' [Ps. 139:14-15]<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot Ha-Kodesh* [Lights of Holiness] (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1938, 1985), II:556-560. English translation in Kook and Bokser, *The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook*, 170, 171-172. The two other 'basic changes' in wider society were the change in social outlook and the change in the cosmological outlook.

<sup>7</sup> Abraham Isaac Kook, 'Li-Nevuchei Ha-Dor' [for the Perplexed of This Generation], (<http://kavvanah.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/kook-nevuchai.pdf>, 2010), 11. Originally written c.1900.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

So, for Kook, the lawful nature of the universe, whether one is discussing the birth of stars or of babies, pointed to a divine cause; and if the science told us that the evolution of the cosmos and of life itself took millions upon millions of years to achieve, then this only added to the glory of the creator. It is also clear that at this stage of his thought, Kook located biological evolution within a tradition of Western natural philosophy, with which, he implied, the faithful Jew should familiarize himself.

[It is] only through lack of understanding that the perplexed of our generation think that the theory of evolution according to Kant and Laplace and Darwin, and other scholars of this time, will bring with it the destruction of the Torah.<sup>9</sup>

This expression of theistic evolution, utterly free of any suspicion of the science of evolution and even alluding explicitly to Darwin and to the idea of deep time, that is, to a geological conception of time rather than a biblical one, was repeated in a notebook entry he made on the subject in around 1904, around the same time that he first articulated the value of the secular Zionist. In it, he discussed the topic in strategic terms and in relation to how one might engage with secular Jews, drawing upon Maimonides as a model for rhetorical tactics. He argued that, just as for the sake of argument Maimonides had assumed the commonly accepted idea of the eternity of the world so that he could go on and prove the existence and nature of God in the medieval period, so now it was useful to assume the truth of evolution in the modern world. Even if one did not accept the theory of evolution, he suggested, it was better to present the eternal truths of Torah in relation to evolution than to set up Torah in opposition to evolution because this would only alienate those Jews who embraced a scientific worldview and would only cause them to discount the Torah.<sup>10</sup> As a result, and with Maimonides as an authority, Kook could say that the theory of evolution posed no threat to the religious Jew. And this was important to him, because it meant that one did not have to unnecessarily offend Jewish secularists by denouncing the theory.

At this early stage, Kook saw no threat from evolution and had even articulated a theistic form of the theory. But he was also acutely aware that, with its supposedly anti-religious implications, the secular version of the theory appeared to polarize religious and anti-religious Jews and to set them against each other. Concerned as he was not to alienate the secular Jew, and especially the secular Zionist, he countenanced his fellow co-religionists to adopt a conciliatory approach to the subject, 'for the sake of heaven'. Considered alongside his concern to defend secular Zionists, Kook's early discussions of evolution suggest that his interest in it was not just theological but was also political, at least in terms of its implications for how to engage with secular Jews and, especially, secular Zionists. The second stage of Kook's thought on evolution, which will concern us for the remainder of the essay and which has been the main focus of previous scholarship, relates to the development of his mystical conception of 'creative evolution'. It, too, was

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 19. Kant appeared to assume the biological science of evolutionists such as Buffon and others, and in *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755) he himself published a nebular theory for the origin of stars and planets that antedated the famous nebular hypothesis for the solar system found in Laplace's *Exposition du système du monde* (1796). In this context, Kook's interest in Darwin is in relation to the idea of transmutation in general, rather than any particular interest in natural selection as a mechanism.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham Isaac Kook and Boaz Ofen, eds., *Kevatzim Mi-Ktav Yad Kadsho* [Notebooks Written by His Holy Hand] (Jerusalem: Makhon le-Hotzaat Ginzei ha-Reayah, 2006), 66-67. Originally written c.1904.

written for a religious Jewish readership. The suggestion made here is that this was a more fully worked out theological justification for his earlier strategic conviction that no obstacles should be placed in the path of the secular Zionists, whose work in building up the Land was a vital contribution to the Messianic hope.

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In his collection of essays, *Orot Ha-Teshuvah* [Lights of Penitence] first published in 1925, Kook suggested that if one properly understood the fundamental teaching of both Judaism and evolutionary theory from a mystical perspective, one could readily reconcile the two. Those who regarded the idea of evolution as antagonistic to Jewish religion were, in his view, ignorant of some of Judaism's deeper teachings and therefore unnecessarily despondent about evolution's widespread success. Like many before and since, Kook understood evolutionary theory in narrowly progressive terms, and saw life developing with a pronounced upwards trajectory, ever improving. As such, he saw parallels to the old Lurianic conception of a broken cosmos in which the divine fragments are strewn across the world and seeking to find their way back to perfect union in the godhead. As he explained,

The doctrine of evolution that is presently gaining acceptance in the world has a greater affinity with the secret teachings of the *Cabbalah* than all other philosophies. Evolution, which proceeds on a course of improvement, offers us the basis of optimism in the world. How can we despair when we realize that everything evolves and improves? In probing the inner meaning of evolution toward an improved state, we find here an explanation of the divine concepts with absolute clarity. It is precisely the *En Sof* [the indefinable God beyond all being] in action that manages to bring to realization the infinite potentiality. Evolution sheds light on all the ways of God. All existence evolves and ascends, as this may be discerned in some of its parts. Its ascent is general as it is in particulars. It ascends toward the heights of the absolute good.<sup>11</sup>

So the theory of evolution was not as revolutionary as either its proponents or its opponents suggested. Religious Jews, properly enlightened in the ways of mysticism, had always comprehended the truths contained within this ostensibly modern theory. For kabbalists understood that the spiritual realm, which was characterized by a process or ascent, was profoundly connected with the physical world in which the evolutionary processes of progress also applied. He conceived of evolution, whether cosmic or biological, as a mending of the world (*tikkun ha-olam*) and a return to God (*teshuvah*). This understanding could also be found in *Orot Ha-Kodesh*.

The concept of evolution, which has become widespread in all circles as a result of the new studies of nature, wrought a major revolution in the circle of those accustomed to conventional [secular] thinking. This was not the case with enlightened individuals, the masters of thought and reflection who always envisioned gradual development – even in the realm of the spiritual,

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<sup>11</sup> Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot Ha-Teshuvah* [Lights of Penitence] (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1925, 1985), II:555. English translation in Abraham Isaac Kook and Ben Zion Bokser, *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness, the Moral Principles, Essays, Letters and Poems* (London: SPCK, 1979), 220-221.

which they viewed with profound mystical probing. For them it was not strange to understand in a parallel fashion the development of the material world. It is indeed appropriate to envision its emergence as similar to the unfolding of the spiritual dimension of existence, which does not show a hiatus of a single wasted step ...<sup>12</sup>

Kook went on to argue that one should not fear heresies of the secular world in so far as they often contained the seeds of their own destruction. Evolutionary theory was a case in point: while the secularists had attempted to use it to discredit religion, the faithful could view it as evidence of divine Providence.

Wherever the heretics [i.e. non-believers] find the basis of their disavowal of religious belief, there one can also find an appropriate response to their views ... All those arguments that are cited as leading to heresy, when one probes their basic assumptions, are themselves supportive of a deeper religious faith, more luminous and vital than was conveyed in the simple conception that prevailed before the confrontation of the challenge. Creative evolution, which tends to be embraced by all who follow the lessons of rationality based on sense perception, at first poses a challenge to religion which stresses the all-pervading power of God. In truth one cannot overemphasize the importance of the concept [of 'creative evolution'] which eliminates all deficiency in the emergence of existence.<sup>13</sup>

It was clear to Kook that, firstly, the process demonstrated a progressive aspect to nature and suggested a goal for all of existence.

Every creature is under a sufficient providential directive from God, and the infinite power of God is sufficient to guide the destiny of all things. When this concept [of organic evolution] emerged, though its initial direction was uncertain and, when viewed on a superficial level, it seemed to remove the light of God as a factor in our thinking, in its deeper implications it was the most significant source for establishing the belief in divine providence. The development which proceeds with such resoluteness, from below to above, from the lower creatures to the highest, without deviating from its path, points to a goal envisioned in the distant beginnings, beyond precise calculation, and it indicates an appointed goal for all existence.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, such a progressive process had to have a guiding hand behind it, whether one is speaking of biological life or spiritual life.

Since everything moves toward a goal, there must be an eye that watches over everything, and since everything evolves, and there is room in man's self-perfection and his perfection of the world for ascending in stages, he fulfills in such acts the will of his Creator. The highest level of man's spiritual development thus reveals itself as more basic in the rhythm of existence, and man's ascent to higher levels thus appears preplanned. Moreover, the end of the design, and its anticipation, reveals the ultimate objective which was there from the inception.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kook, *Orot Ha-Kodesh* [Lights of Holiness], II:556-560. English translation in Kook and Bokser, *The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook*, 170, 171-172.

<sup>13</sup> Kook, *Orot Ha-Kodesh* [Lights of Holiness], II:565-566. English translation in Kook and Bokser, *The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook*, 173.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 173-174.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 174.

Thirdly, such a progressive process correlated with Jewish conceptions of spiritual progress and the afterlife. The authority of such teachings was only increased with the evidence that progressive principles underlay the natural world itself, and which might act to inspire the religious mind.

Our thinking necessarily reaches the position that the creation of this [physical] world and of the world to come, of the future of the individual and the general future of the world, were all envisioned in one perspective and all are interrelated ... All the moral values rise, invested with the divine significance. Moreover, we are given a basis for our hopes and an assurance that they will be fulfilled. The potency of anticipation is matched by the potency in the process of realization [in the biological realm]. It thus turns out that the possibility of progress beyond the limits of natural law becomes conceivable, and it is compatible with all the elements of accepted teachings.<sup>16</sup>

Thus Kook believed in a cosmic evolutionary process ('creative evolution') in which nature and human spirituality were evolving to ever higher levels of unity, and that the world in all its dimensions was moving towards perfection. Contra the heretics, modern evolutionary theory was by no means a threat; rather, it appeared to dovetail neatly with such a worldview. And, in principle, Kook believed this was true of science in general, asserting that one could successfully integrate the best of scientific thought with Judaism. For this he returned to Maimonides, whom he now presented as a model for an integrationist approach in an essay on the reasons for the commandments.

The relationship of the doctrine of evolution – in all its ramifications – to Judaism, and its fundamental concepts in our time, is similar to the ancient confrontation of the teaching about the eternity of the universe with Judaism in the time of the spiritual polemic with the Greeks. Here we need to follow resolutely the scientific method of Maimonides, although the methods of reasoning have changed with the changing times. With all the scientific defects in the theory of evolution, which is presently at the inception of its development and in its early stages, let us take courage to base the triumphant affirmation of Judaism on the basis of its assumptions, which, on the face it, seem so antagonistic to us ... [W]e shall endeavor to establish our spiritual position, not on the basis of any particular philosophy or on the basis of a commitment to some particular ideal, but through the fusion of all the idealistic forces, each now operative in isolation, integrating them into a comprehensive ensemble ... Through the graces of unending integration it gives us the faithful reassurance that even in the future, when 'new' songs will be heard, and when our intellectual and cultural claims will take on new form, even then a fountain of life will be open wide for us, to achieve great and new things, through the medium of clear understanding ...<sup>17</sup>

From early on Kook had disagreed with those who believed that the Darwinian 'new song' had challenged the Genesis account of creation. As he saw it, such critics had not adopted the correct perspective on the texts and thus misunderstood its inner meaning. For Kook, Judaism had at its disposal a hermeneutical approach to Torah that, regardless of whether or not one accepted the findings of the scientists, made such findings irrelevant and thus

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Abraham Isaac Kook, 'Talele Orot' [Fragments of Light], *Takhemomi* 1 (1910). English translation in Kook and Bokser, *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness, the Moral Principles, Essays, Letters and Poems*, 306.

made opposition unnecessary. In one letter to a disciple, dated 1905, he asserted that no conflict exists if one bore in mind the allusive and parabolic nature of the Torah.

Even if it were shown that creation occurred through the evolution of the species, there would still be no contradiction. We calculate time according to the words of the Torah, which are far more relevant to us than are other sources. The Torah obviously obscures the account of creation and speaks in allusions and parables. All know that the account of creation is one of the secrets of the Torah. For if all these statements were taken literally, what secrets would there be? ... The main point [of the Genesis narrative] is the knowledge of God and the true moral life.<sup>18</sup>

And in a letter to the same individual in 1908, he wrote again:

I find it necessary to explain to your noble self how we are to respond to teachings imported to us through recent scientific research [on evolution] which for the most part tend to contradict the simple meaning of the texts of the Torah [i.e. the six day creation of Genesis 1]. It is my opinion that one who is of sound understanding must know that though it does not follow that these new teachings are necessarily true, we are not at all under the obligation to deny them categorically and to oppose them. It is not at all the intent of the Torah to tell us [factual] stories about past events. What is primary is the substantive content, the inner meaning of the subjects discussed ... It is of no consequence to us if there was once in the world a golden age, when man enjoyed much good, materially and spiritually, or that existence began by developing from a lower to a higher state and continues to evolve. What we must know is that there is the definite possibility that even if man should reach a higher state of development, and be in line to enjoy all the honor and delight life can offer, if he should corrupt his behavior he may lose everything, and injure himself and his descendants for many generations. This inference is suggested to us by the experience of man in the Garden of Eden, his sin and banishment ...<sup>19</sup>

For Kook, the meaning of the Genesis account had nothing to do with the process of biological evolution, *per se*. Furthermore, he went on, evolutionary theory was at an early stage and when it eventually came to recognize the distinct stages or leaps in creation, it would actually confirm the developmental stages outlined in Genesis.

In general the concept of evolution is itself in the early stages of its development. It will undoubtedly change its form, and it will come up with perceptions which will acknowledge that there were also leaps in the world's development [expressed in Genesis as days]. This will help to complete the vision of experience. Then will the light of Judaism be understood in its substantive brightness.<sup>20</sup>

A little later, around 1910, Kook offered another explicit refutation of the claim that the science threatened a traditionalist reading of the Torah. In *Shemonah Kevatzim* [Eight Notebooks] Kook suggested that one can and should present the Genesis account of creation as being in harmony with the findings of modern science. Thus the six days could be presented as referring to vast periods of time; there were certainly millions of years

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<sup>18</sup> Letter to Moshe Seidel, 1905, in Abraham Isaac Kook and Tzvi Yehudah Kook, eds., *Letters of Rav Kook* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1967), letter 91.

<sup>19</sup> Letter to Moshe Seidel, 1908, in Kook and Bokser, *The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook*, 78-79.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Moshe Seidel, 1908, in *ibid.*

between mankind's origins and the emergence of family life and civilization, that is, the moment when humanity realized that it was separate from the rest of the animal kingdom. Likewise, the real meaning of the account that God caused 'a deep sleep' to fall upon Adam, and took one of his ribs to form woman, had to do with the time it took mankind to recognize the profound significance of marriage and the underlying unity of humankind. For Kook, the Genesis account was focused on the idea of the development of man's self-understanding of his special nature and inter-relationships, and not the specifics of the timeframe of creation or a literalist reading.<sup>21</sup>

Taken together with his proposed biblical hermeneutics, Kook's mystical appreciation of evolution offered a kind of synthetic account that appeared to reconcile Judaism with the science. It meant that the faithful need not feel obliged to attack evolutionary theory. However, this apparent complementarity was very one-sided. For Kook, the secular, scientific theory was a cruder version of a grander, infinitely more profound religious existential truth. There can be no doubt that he would never have countenanced the idea of science offering a corrective to Jewish teaching, not least because of the limitations of human knowledge and the dynamic nature of theoretical science. As he put it in one of his letters,

There is no contradiction between the Torah and any of the world's scientific knowledge. We do not have to accept theories as certainties, no matter how widely accepted, for they are like grass that withers. Before long, scientific knowledge will develop further and all of today's new theories will be derided. ... But the word of God will endure forever.<sup>22</sup>

And in *Orot Ha-Kodesh*, he maintained the superiority of religion as a form of knowledge.

Religious wisdom ranks higher than all other sciences in this: religious wisdom transforms the will and the spiritual attributes of its learners, drawing them to the supernal heights on which its concern is focused. ... All secular sciences lack this capacity because they cannot, by themselves, engender anything new.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, in *Orot Ha-Teshuvah* Kook even expressed concerns about the dangers of his proposed grand vision of evolution, which encompassed the secular theory of evolution. As he put it, 'A life-enhancing and a life-negating principle are embodied in it.' For while a proper understanding of cosmic evolution which focused on future spiritual perfection would set a man 'on the right course and strengthen his moral senses ... [and can act as] a great light that directs him to endless progress', he fretted that 'the [theory's] concept of the past will inspire him with fear'. This was because

When a person looks backward and sees the lowly [animalistic] state in his past, and considers his own present moral, intellectual and physiological condition, so fortunate, so happily in contrast to the past, his mind becomes disoriented on the one hand. His moral discipline is weakened. Whatever moral sensibility he may feel in himself when the evil inclination of some

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<sup>21</sup> Abraham Isaac Kook, *Shemonah Kevatzim* [Eight Notebooks], 2 vols. (Jerusalem: n.p., 2004), 1:594. Originally written c.1910.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Moshe Seidel, 1905, in Kook and Kook, eds., *Letters of Rav Kook* [Hebrew], letter 91.

<sup>23</sup> Kook, *Orot Ha-Kodesh* [Lights of Holiness], 1:1, cited in Cherry, 'Three Twentieth-Century Jewish Responses to Evolutionary Theory', 258.

lust should assail him he will say that it is too much for a creature like himself, whose origin is from dumb beasts and crude savagery.<sup>24</sup>

So while he could even go so far as to accept the bestial origins of humankind, Kook's mystical appreciation of evolution was a limited one, and his response to modernity was very much constrained by his ultimate loyalty to the eternal teachings of Judaism. As Cherry puts it, Kook sought to integrate a devalued science into his worldview.<sup>25</sup> It is too ambivalent a theory to be a genuinely complementary or synthetic model. Even as a defence of the Jewish religion for the consumption of faithful Jews in the face of the challenges of a hostile modernity, this attempt to reconcile kabbalah with science was not entirely convincing. But as an attempt to give pause for thought, it possessed a certain political utility.

If one assumes, as does Cherry, that Kook addressed the question of evolution simply as one of science versus religion, and that he developed a mystical theology that could reassure his followers in the face of the uncertainties raised by secular science, then one can set Zionism aside. As we have seen, however, there are reasons for thinking that such an account fails to do justice to what Kook actually set out to achieve. Cherry's account of Kook's mystico-philosophical teachings on evolution not only fails to mention his religious Zionism, which was central to his thought, it also ignores earlier sources which suggest that the familiar mystical dimension was entirely absent from Kook's initial musings on evolutionary theory. If these aspects are taken into consideration, then another way of looking at it all emerges. It is possible to suggest that Kook's project was not simply an inward-directed response to modernity, but that his interest in evolution developed alongside a defence of secular Zionism, and that his fully-fledged theory of 'creative evolution' functioned to reduce the hostility of his fellow religious Zionists towards the science-orientated secular Zionists.

In summary, Kook, as a passionate religious Zionist, believed that secular Zionists were acting religiously and in accordance with God's will, whether they recognized it or not. He was concerned to understand the causes of their rejection of Judaism and became convinced that evolutionary theory played a significant role. In his early writings Kook claimed that, for enlightened Jews, evolution represented no threat to Judaism or to a correct reading of Genesis. But since, as he well understood, the scientific theory was important to secular Jews as a foundational truth of the Western culture they espoused, and since he preferred not to adopt a hostile, confrontational stance but rather a conciliatory, accommodationist one, he urged his co-religionists to act as if the theory was true, to accept it as true for the sake of argument. In this they would be following the example of engagement with unfamiliar philosophies first established by Maimonides. Later, Kook developed a more sophisticated, more engaged method to reconcile what he regarded as the partial truths of evolution with Judaism, and he did so without committing himself to any particular scientific theory, since, as he made clear, such theories were transient in contrast to Judaism's eternal truths. For this he focused, as we have seen, on the mystical parallels with the scientific conception of evolution, and to

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<sup>24</sup> Kook, *Orot Ha-Teshuvah* [Lights of Penitence], II:561. Reproduced in Kook and Bokser, *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness, the Moral Principles, Essays, Letters and Poems*, 231-232.

<sup>25</sup> Cherry summarized Kook's position on evolution as 'Western thought had finally caught up with the Kabbalah!' Cherry, 'Three Twentieth-Century Jewish Responses to Evolutionary Theory', 258.

present the science as a partial understanding of a fuller kabbalistic knowledge of cosmic evolution to his religious readership. While this scheme was not developed in any great depth or detail, it was sufficient for his purposes, namely, to persuade his co-religionists to avoid unnecessary conflict with the secular Zionists, at least in regard to their commitment to evolution. It seems reasonable to suggest, then, that Kook's interest in evolutionary theory was as much a strategic attempt to reconcile warring religious and secular Zionists as it was an apologetic endeavour to reconcile science and religion.

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