

jacob riis and the jews

the ambivalent quest for community

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There have been few figures in American immigrant history who more tirelessly expounded upon the nature of Americanization than Jacob Riis. Against the steady growth of a disenchanting critical realism assessing the costs of estrangement in American life, Riis continually pointed out how the immigrant's past could comport well with his present. Riis' very achievements—and they surely were no mean ones—led him as well as such differing figures as Theodore Roosevelt, Lincoln Steffens, and Jane Robbins to see his life invested with a culturally significant form, one worthy of emulation.¹ As James Lane, Riis' most recent and astute biographer, has suggested, his importance can be traced to his bridging “the gap between the two Americas that he confronted as an immigrant”;² he had hoped that a divided America, one rich and one poor, could “evolve into an organic unity.”³

Riis' works can be read to indicate that such a hope was not delusive. His studies of the slums (*How the Other Half Lives*, 1890; *A Ten Years' War*, 1900; *The Battle with the Slum*, 1902), his portrayal of and tales about tenement youth (*The Children of the Poor*, 1892; *Out of Mulberry Street*, 1898), his exhortation about the family (*The Peril and Preservation of the Home*, 1903), his memoirs (*The Making of an American*, 1901; *The Old Town*, 1909), and his venture in campaign biography (*Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen*, 1903) are all of a kind. As a whole, they con-



firm his belief that American promises of civil liberties and social freedom would erode the narrow sectarianism of the European past if they could be nurtured.

But despite this faith, his prejudice, while deeply suppressed as his prominence grew, makes the body of his social thought problematic. His use of often unsettling racial stereotypes in his writing has, at best, been dismissed as a sign that he was not unaffected by the controversial hatreds of his time.⁴ But his attitudes about race, ethnicity, an immigrant group's cultural autonomy, were not merely off-the-cuff responses. Instead, they were genuine expressions of the unresolved elements that composed his thought and marked his life. In many ways they illuminate his place within a larger American response concerned with defining the acceptable norms of a culture. The American Home Missionary Society, a Congregationalist association; theologians such as Josiah Strong in *Our Country* (1885) and *The New Era* (1893); and literary realists and naturalists such as William Dean Howells and Frank Norris in their fiction all addressed themselves to what they felt were the unassimilable aspects of immigrant and urban life that challenged the nature of acculturation. The swelling of cities by hordes of non Anglo-Saxon immigrants, the inability of the Protestant clergy to make contact with the tenement masses, the clinging to European mores and, at times, attraction to socialism, anarchism and communism by the foreign born wrought changes in the day-to-day texture of American urban life. It is Riis' impassioned sketches of the foreign-born poor that call into doubt our acceptance of his program for a desirable community. A study of this aspect of his work may well provide us with a different understanding of not only the man, but also the fears and hopes of his contemporaries. In particular Riis' depiction of "downtown" or Eastern European Jewry in New York's lower East Side throws his aspirations for a democratic culture of promise into relief.

Modern social criticism has pointed out that the Jews played a central role, somewhat emblematic, in the testing of an American ethos.⁵ The image of the Jew in American letters and urban discourse was protean, reflecting on the one hand social and economic frustration, produced by a maturing, industrial capitalism, expressing on the other hand the redemptive mission of Christianity. Whether seen as the predatory animal of unchecked capitalism (a phrase taken up in Riis' lifetime in the New York guide books of G. G. Foster, a mid-nineteenth-century reporter for the New York *Tribune*, as well as by Henry Adams, Frank Norris, and Ignatius Donnelly) or the creature of a debased religion, hostile to promises of salvation (dramatized by such novelists as Joseph Ingraham and Florence Kingsley),⁶ the Jew evoked responses that pointed out the disparity between American promises of egalitarianism and American social realities.

Riis' thought expressed such tensions. He wished to aid the growth

of what best can be called an historically relevant Christian culture, one receptive to and appreciative of, the industrial achievements and values of his time. The elements of a Social Gospel (cooperation, an individualism based upon and held in check by shared religious assumptions, a devotion to Christ through strenuous service to man) were ironically wed to the most robust features of an American secularism (rugged individualism, a bold entrepreneurial spirit, a powerful chauvinism). His espousal of such a self-devouring ideology that exalted notions of both universalism and particularism, one that was committed to two differing interpretations of human nature and rational endeavor, invariably reflected paradox and contradiction—often the actual expression of the very terms of analysis and assumption. For the notion of a Christian capitalist society could only be deployed to check the excesses—but not the very nature—of the competitive market: witness the slogan “Philanthropy and five per cent,” an exhortation to make a modest, humane profit from tenement construction; such an interpretation seizes upon one out of many versions of democratic civil life and identifies it as the acceptable norm of a national culture. In fact, Riis was given to speak of Americanization as the triumph of homogenous *mores* and aspirations that subdued undesirable folkways, competing allegiances and radical politics. Acculturation, for Riis, could be measured by its success in eradicating a group’s unique, informing past by sloughing off inappropriate, though often felt ties, to European loyalties which fostered, for example, the *padrone* and ward boss in New York and politics such as socialism and anarchism. Ironically, many of these were the avenues so often sought by and invariably denied to the European emigre before he made his journey into the modern world of America.

While Riis rarely devoted himself to studying the ways and neighborhoods of northern European immigrants who found New York a convenient, attractive *entrepot*, the Eastern European Jews caught his attention. From his early newspaper days, through his mature years, he took an interest in charting, at times instructing, and occasionally complaining about such immigrants in their quest for community. For Riis, the downtown Jew proved a perplexing figure. Riis saw him as rapacious and somewhat unassimilable, yet highly responsive to American promises of freedom and opportunity by the mere fact of his having emigrated to the United States; he could be stiff-necked in his own spiritual blindness, yet an indication of the spiritual decay of American Christianity; he preserved a valued familial cohesiveness, yet fractured it through sweatshop labor; he could be an ardent patriot, but not one uncritical of American society.

Possibly, his fascination with Eastern European Jews was one way Riis had of strategically distancing himself from his own process of Americanization, for his life can be interpreted as paradoxical, in fact

suggestive of an American duality, as he himself tried to mediate the heady distractions of materialism and the steady tug of Christian piety. His own past was becoming but a memory (he had written to a relative that he was losing his fluency in Danish, and that he was writing for the Danish press to regain, in part, his native tongue; years later, he would sadly admit that his recollection of Ribe, the town of his birth, had been swept away by the present). His success was hard won, and he could never rest on his income (his finances were often depleted by his children's brushes with misfortune, and in the last years of his life, he undertook grueling lecture tours—in order to have money for his farm—that surely hastened his death). His aspirations for a harmonious family life were shattered (one son was berated as a scapegrace; another made an unfortunate marriage; one daughter married a ne'er-do-well by Riis' own accounts). He could be an embarrassingly fervent chauvinist, but would remain uneasy with the rich diversity and extreme ends of American social life.⁷

He was not beset by feelings about the political thinness of the chauvinism of his day which provoked, in many instances, the strident aesthetic and political manifestoes of his times. Unlike Hutchins Hapgood, who was bedazzled by Jewish life, anarchist politics and bohemian ways, or Jane Addams, who encouraged ethnic diversity as a legitimate part of settlement work, or Vida Scudder, who was not at all reluctant to admit she carried a "red card," or Florence Kelley, who was versed in the theory and nature of alienation, Riis was discomfited with the pressures that immigrants applied to resist the practice of a homogenous American life. I suspect that his divided loyalties made such alternative ways of dealing with diversity and ethnicity personally uncomfortable and potentially disruptive to his own notion of himself: an American in the making.

Whether Riis described the foreign born with a humane sympathy or was unable to respond emphatically with their plight raises a question, often asked by his readers who are responsive to these affective, opposing elements of his writing. Possessing a Dickensian eye for quickly vivifying a milieu, a group, a character, Riis was both adulatory and condescending—tactically measuring the immigrant's potential for Americanization at the expense of an often enriching past. Describing what he felt to be the major traits of Orientals, Italians, and Jews, he was quick to limn those features that hindered the growth of a uniform culture. His revulsion for Orientals never diminished. In his early days of fame, he declaimed that the "Chinese must go."⁸ Twenty years later, he pronounced, with no qualm, that "For . . . many years now we have been discussing the immigrants. . . . Only as regards the Asiatic we have made a flat verdict of exclusion."⁹ The ferocious energies of Russian Jews astonished him, but he reminded his reader that "Money is their God."¹⁰ The vibrancy of Italian life proved attractive, but he argued

that this group “promptly reproduces conditions of destitution and disorder which, set in the framework of Mediterranean exuberance, are the delight of the artist but in a matter-of-fact American community become its danger and reproach.”¹¹

His studies, then, have a cautionary timbre. *How the Other Half Lives* warned its public of the “sea of a mighty population held in galling fetters, [heaving] uneasily in the tenements.”¹² *The Battle With the Slum* (a somewhat revised version of *A Ten Years’ War*) admonished its audience that the “children are our tomorrow, and as we mould them to-day so will they deal with us then.”¹³ *The Children of the Poor* claimed that there was good reason “for the sharp attention given at last to the life and doings of the other half, too long unconsidered. Philanthropy we call it sometimes with patronizing airs. Better call it self-defence.”¹⁴

His lectures also conveyed a persistent sense of urgency. Delivering an address entitled “Changing the Slums,” he argued that “any sacrifice” in aiding the children of the poor,

will be *cheap insurance*: We hear much of socialism in our days. There are two brands of socialism and one we shall have to *let in*. One says: *What is mine* is thine—that is service. The other says: *What is Thine is mine*—that is vengeance of which let us beware lest, sowing the storm we reap the whirlwind.¹⁵

Or, as he remarked in his speech “On the Boy Scout Movement,” if a youth “is left to the *opportunities of the sereet*, of the gutter, he will take them, and they do not lead to respect for property.”¹⁶ Or, as he pointed out about the poor who felt that justice in America could only be bought, “*There is but one step from that to the torch and the bomb. Property in the eyes of such a maddened man becomes a crime.*”¹⁷

Riis was aware of his strident rhetoric and once mentioned how consciously it was crafted. Discussing the writing of *How the Other Half Lives*, he reflected, “My aim was to arouse conscience and excite sympathy. In a crowd of a hundred the one who limps excites attention & sympathy—those who go on sound legs go unnoticed. Therefore I ‘limped’ purposely, I was presenting wrongs to be redressed.”¹⁸ While there can be no doubt that Riis was deeply shaken by the plight of the immigrant poor, and described in eloquent terms the nature of their life, his very language expressed both his own ambivalence about the value of an ethnic group’s enduring mores and the fears of a nativist audience uneasy with the rapid changes wrought in American life by massive waves of immigrants. As Henry Cabot Lodge declaimed, one only has to turn to *How the Other Half Lives* for a “vivid picture” of “the degrading effect of this constant importation of the lowest forms of labor.”¹⁹ Eradicating the slum, replacing ethnic diversity with a felicitous norm and restricting immigration were, ultimately, ways to

fend off radical politics and fear of the mob. Riis' remarks can easily be placed alongside William Dean Howells' temporizing sketches and comments of lower East Side life, Henry James' uneasiness with a transnational Manhattan, and Hamlin Garland's snide distaste for polyglot New York. As Riis himself put it, in *How the Other Half Lives*,

The one thing you shall vainly ask for in the chief city of America is a distinctly American community. There is none; certainly not among the tenements. Where have they gone to, the old inhabitants? . . . They are not here. In their place has come this queer conglomerate mass of heterogenous elements, ever striving and working like whiskey and water in one glass, and with the like result: final union and a prevailing taint of whiskey.²⁰

Yet to raise this question in these terms and not to see American history as the register of immigration and acculturation would stress the palliative notion that the American character was essentially a homogeneous one formed by the uniform influence of environment, whether it be the prairie, the forests, or the city. (Such was Edward Saveth's brilliant interpretation of such nineteenth-century historians as Francis Parkman, Theodore Roosevelt, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Henry Cabot Lodge.)²¹ This reading of the American persona, this invention of that persona, would lend itself to misconceptions about ethnic particularism; for this could be seen as something easily stripped away from a pure or undifferentiated self and replaced by more compelling allegiances and mores.²²

In fact, Riis bleached the wildly contrasting colors of downtown Jewry. He often portrayed it as monochromatic, and his most well-known portrait of it in *How the Other Half Lives* reduced its spectrum to an easily graspable eidetic norm: the rapacious figure of an antique faith. Yet the downtown community was a teeming one; its inhabitants were as various as its organizations were variable. Amidst socialist, Zionist, religious, agnostic, atheistic, and linguistic circles, East Side Jewish life exhibited underlying characteristics, albeit with paradoxical qualities.²³ While Jewish life had its traditional center in the notion of an autonomous history and community, one ringed by exile and embraced by promised redemption, it was, nonetheless, a highly porous group, whose members often adjusted themselves to larger social demands and modern claims. The promise of life in the *goldene medinah*, for many, was that of a civil freedom that permitted and protected diversity; varieties of Jewish life, expressive of whatever mode of identification, would be valid within the context of modern political democracy. Who can forget Cahan's wealthy Levinsky, arguing that his authentic self was the Talmud student named David? Or Lewisohn's argument that Americanization may subdue, but not pacify, the search for an authentic, comforting Jewish life? Or for that matter, the gradual displacement in American-Jewish fiction of American opportunities by the wistful image of Zion?

The quest for a desirable community was of such import to Riis that he could never free himself from the remembered image of his early years and the place of his birth—Ribe, Denmark, of the 1850s. His sense of Christian stewardship, of man's moral obligation to others, of nature as a category of modern urban life, and of an abiding sense of purposeful endeavor was rooted in his village past and would be celebrated in his later years when he would stand aghast at the sordidness and chaos of New York's tenement districts. *How the Other Half Lives*, *The Peril and Preservation of the Home*, and *A Ten Years' War* emphasized the need for the restoration of traditional agents of social control—the church, the school, the loving family. He would come to support almost any enterprise that encouraged the growth of face-to-face contact, social intimacy and concern. Whether encouraging the work of the Small Parks Committee (he served as its secretary in 1897), or supporting a pedagogical movement to restore “play” to children's lives, or fighting for schools to attach parks and playgrounds to their buildings or starting a campaign to bring flowers into the slums and gardens into the schools, he was engaged in sharing with the children of the slums the significant values of his youth.

His recollections of his childhood, poignantly expressed in *The Making of an American* and *The Old Town*, belong to a substantial body of American letters that praised the cohesive, intimate nature of village life. During Riis' American years, 1870 through 1914, the United States became a nation of cities; depictions of rural life and childhood recollections on the part of natives and immigrants alike were often redefinitions of communal virtues that seemed to be eroded by an urban milieu. The lament for the village, the longing for what Ferdinand Tönnies defined for a generation of social thinkers as *gemeinschaft* or community, runs like a leitmotif through the fiction of Booth Tarkington, the poetry of James Whitcomb Riley, the memoirs of William Dean Howells and the social philosophies of Jane Addams, Josiah Royce, and John Dewey.²⁴

While a psychoanalytic reading of Riis' public memoirs might suggest how fragile and attenuated his visions of the past really were, what emerges from his recollections are childhood scenes of wide vistas, open horizons, a vast terrain for an aesthetic education. Ribe, with its apparently intimate life, gave him a scale to measure the integrity and health of American neighborhoods. It also gave him much more: he was led to emphasize—as did Friedrich Froebel, the German nineteenth-century educator, whose writings Riis seemed to have known—that an aesthetic of order was consonant with moral experience (playgrounds, he pointed out, echoing Froebel, would help slum children perceive “moral relations”).²⁵ Moreover, Ribe's somewhat placid life suggested to him that

the emphatic values of community could resist the avaricious spirit of the market. For the town, as he recalled it, stood distractedly between two epochs: one, characterized by amity, cooperation, a common heritage and face-to-face trade; the other, marked by the impersonal, calculating values of a nascent capitalism. In *The Old Town*, Riis traced the moral heritage of this transitory period:

Varde was the next town, a little way up the coast. The symbol of that justice was an iron hand over the town gate which, tradition said, warned any who might be disposed to buy up grain and food-stuffs to their own gain, that for "cornering" the means of living, in Ribe a man had his right hand cut off. Good that the hand was never nailed on Trinity Church or on the Chicago Board of Trade, else what a one-handed lot of men we should have there and in Wall Street!²⁶

As he recalled, Ribe had little diversity; economic conflict, social polarization and extreme poverty were not present. As he put it, "there were no very rich people, but the poor were not poor either in the sense in which one thinks of poverty in a great city. They had always enough to eat and were comfortably housed. There were no beggars . . ." ²⁷ Cultural homogeneity was so powerful a feature of the town's life (its citizens were still shocked by the power of the Prussian military) that amidst praise of the indomitable folk-spirit of the Danes, Riis jestingly recounted how the spirit of community could hold in check authentic differences. He spoke of Ribe's Jews:

Across the main street from the Quedens home one of the two Jewish families in Ribe kept shop. They were quiet good people, popular with their neighbors, who took little account of the fact that they were Jews. The Old Town was not given to religious discussions, for good cause: with this exception it was all one way. There was not a Roman Catholic in the country, I think . . . We were all Lutherans, and that as such we had a monopoly of the way of salvation followed, of course.

So perhaps it was not so strange after all that Mrs. Tacchau should fall out with her life-long friend, Mrs. Kerst, who was as stubbornly zealous in her churchmanship as she was good and generous in her life. The Jewess had always known how to steer clear of the dangerous reef, but at last they struck it fair.

"Well, well, dear friend," said she, trying to desperately back away, "don't let us talk about it. Some day when we meet in heaven we shall know much better."

It was too much. Her friend absolutely bristled.

"What! *Our* heaven? Indeed, no! Here we can be friends, Mrs. Tacchau. But there—really, excuse *me!*

It has helped me over many a stile since to remember that she really was a good woman. She was that. I have seldom known a better.²⁸

Elsewhere, Riis repeated this anecdote with minor variation; yet the point remained the same—that of good fellowship and the fine triumph

of the refusal to breach seeming notions of universality and convention. The spirit of public life was not to reflect private difference. Clearly, such Jewish families were likable because they would not permit their religious beliefs to affect their civic life.

The impulse for cultural unity, for common values beneath different practices, was one measure Riis found serviceable to judge a religious or ethnic group's potential for assimilation. The other was a firm, abiding affirmation of Christian endeavor in the midst of the market. In his early American days, his father had cautioned him against confusing spiritual interests with "those things that rust and moths can destroy . . ." Jacob was admonished to resist the "restless search for money"²⁹ that characterized American business life. Amidst penniless times and jobs that sorely tested his character, his experience in a police lodging house (he was robbed; a pet dog was clubbed to death by a policeman) confirmed the gravity of his father's advice. "The outrage of that night became, in the providence of God, the means of putting an end to one of the foulest abuses that ever disgraced a Christian city, and a mainspring in the battle with the slum as far as my share in it is concerned."³⁰ Years later, he would have another and no less powerful "conversion" through which he came to see his civic life and personal endeavor as consecrated. In his "The Methodist Spirit: A Tribute," he recalled that

It was in the old Eighteenth Street Methodist Church in Brooklyn, where I was editing a newspaper in the days long gone by, that I made the beginning. I was young, hot-headed, alone in the world, when Brother Ichabod Simmons came there and preached, and brought me to my knees in no time. In deep contrition for the past, and joy in the life I had found, I would have thrown away pen and pencil and begun over again, but Brother Simmons' hand stayed me. With the zeal of the convert, I would have gone preaching; nothing else would do.

"No, not that," said he, "we need consecrated pens more than we need preaching."³¹

Riis cast his life into mythic form: exile from Ribe, the material temptations of American life, confirmation of purpose, the winning of his childhood sweetheart and sanctified battle. His America, far distant from the unsettling cries found, for example, in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, was the geography of value and the life of fable; it was one's horizon for willful development of the struggling self. (In fact, it is tempting to see his hatred of the slum and visible chaos as that of a religious devotee who would wish to destroy encrusting, barbaric matter that enshackled the soul.)

His public autobiographical statements interpret the dislocation of immigrant life as a confirmation of American idealism and a promise of equality and upward mobility. Disenchantment, failure and sorrow are reduced to symbolic and unambiguous issues. Analysis of self becomes

confused with formulae for success: a characteristic facelessness ensues in spite of all the recounting of personal struggle. Yet such strategies of rhetoric and myth could hardly be deployed by the characters he so vividly studied. The various forms of community that immigrants either brought with them or developed as protective defenses against the distractions of American life were tactics not demanded by the imagination but by rational judgment in its desire to accommodate tradition to American novelty. They were attempts, and on the whole rather successful ones, to participate in selected aspects of American culture while maintaining parallel institutions that bespoke of political and religious allegiances often alien to Riis.

Yet such activities were perplexing and at times abrasive responses to the spirit of fraternalism, as Riis saw them. In one of his earliest and least muted pieces, he described his impressions of Hamburg. Dated Ribe, 1876, the article details his trip home. Passing through Hamburg, his eye rested upon the Jews. For Riis,

Hamburg, much as we had longed for it, did not hold us long, nor interest us much. It is an old city and had never had any other importance than that which its commerce gave it On the whole everything in Hamburg appeared to us to bear a stamp of Jewish avarice that was extremely repulsive; from the brokers at the Boerse [sic], of whom the majority were unquestionably Jews, to the servant girls who with their badges of servitude, a sort of white pad on the head, paraded the streets. We were glad to leave, and when we paid our bowing and smiling Jew waiter at the hotel his "Trinkgeld," it was with the mental resolution that the city should not be honored by our presence oftener and longer than unavoidably necessary.³²

This is as representative a display of the anti-Semitic temper as one can find, and it would be unfair to suggest that Riis never repudiated this view—which he did, many times. Yet the image of Jews as an alien, exotic, unassimilable race, as a group expressing the destructive spirit of capitalism unchecked, as a people resistant to the promises of Christian universalism was never entirely absent from his writings.

ii

As Riis gradually advanced from editor of a small Brooklyn paper to a major figure as a police reporter, his journalism reflected his maturing concerns over the anguishing conditions of urban life. For him, exploring the city and coming upon deserted graveyards, traveling on police launches and watching the dead hauled out of the East River, studying the reports about child abandonment and describing the boom in foundlings, the restoration of community—in its religious and social aspects—became an imperative. Riis was captivated by the urban spectacle; in his newspaper columns, as in his later attacks upon a social

science given to quantification, he could not lose sight of human misery in all its trappings.

The Eastern European Jew became part of an unusual dialectic: whereas Jewish life emphasized the loss of a commanding center in Christian society, the orthodox Jewish community's application of law to everyday life pointed out to Riis how much more the Christian community would have to commit itself to redressing the social inequities of the age. Amidst the dizzying opportunities urban life offered the immigrant for advancement and mobility, the "downtown" Jew seemed to maintain a valued, and valuable, cohesiveness. In one of his most poignant columns, one that appeared in the *New York World*, Riis described his having chanced upon a deserted spot in the middle of "swarming east-side tenements." Speaking of himself in the third person, he explained how he was

confronted suddenly and rather awkwardly by an opening in the rear fence, through which he fell prone on his face while endeavoring to gain an idea of the locality It was a wide inclosure [sic] many times larger than an ordinary yard and rather like a school play-ground, devoid apparently of all traces of vegetation Inquiry developed the fact that the graveyard had belonged to Methodists who built a church two generations ago where the school now stands His interest having been strongly excited, the reporter found a number of like spots scattered through the city—old burial grounds—the names and original owners of which have been forgotten by the busy world that lives and moves around them Sometimes survivors are not willing to have the rest of their dead disturbed. Notably this is the case with Hebrews with whom it amounts to an article of faith. However sharply a Jew may trade with living men, he will not bargain about his father's dust or his grave. Hence there are many Jewish graveyards in odd places in New York.³³

As an emigre whose ties to his mother country were strong, he had such a distinct wish for communal preservation that towards the end of his life he pointed out to a Chautauqua audience that such preservation had wide moral and philanthropic values. In his lecture, given in the summer of 1908, he reflected that it was

not so long since I came across on the East side [sic], in the densest crowd, a Jewish Loan Ass'n, *started for the poor by the very poor*, whose unusual plan was to lend money to those in need *without pledge and without interest*. And though they were orthodox Jews, they did not ask whether those *who applied were Jews*, or Christians or pagans. It was enough *that they were in need*.

So they understand the duty of man to man, of neighbor to neighbor, *all God's children*.

Find me such a Xian [sic] Loan Ass'n.³⁴

For Riis, numerous Talmud-Torah academies and the application of Jewish law to the problems of everyday life became vital signs of a group's

capacity to weather a competitive, capitalistic climate. Whether puzzled over the sudden rise of Jewish adolescent criminality (“The Making of Thieves in New York”³⁵) or praising experiments like the Woodbine Colony that rescued Jews from the tenements, Riis made it clear that the willingness of Jews to respond in a positive manner to the enervating opportunities of an American secularism reminded the Christian community of its own lack of similar enterprise.

On the broadest social level, the vibrant spirit of Talmudics pointed the way for a morally imperative civic rehabilitation. In an article entitled “Playgrounds for City Schools,” Riis remembered that

I was told once by an ex-superintendent of school buildings in a great city that he had no end of trouble trying to make his school-board understand the relation between the number of their scholars and the cubic air-space of the class-rooms. They paid no attention to him until one day he brought a copy of the Talmud to the chief among them, who was a Jew, and showed him that it was all down in the Mosaic law ages and ages ago. That settled it. After that he had his way. We in New York can get up a fine frenzy at short notice over the question of keeping the Bible in our public schools. By all means let it stay, and hoist the flag on the school, too, if it is worthy of it, but until our schools have been made places for which no Christian needs to blush, as he must for many that are crowded every day in this city, this zeal for the Bible is sheer mockery and humbug. It were better to put the Talmud on the principal’s desk, and upon the desk of every School Commissioner as well, until they have learned its lesson.³⁶

On the most subjective level, the willingness to answer and be answerable to, the spirit and letter of religion bore witness to Riis’s own fervor. As he put it, speaking to an audience in 1907 at Harlan, Iowa:

It was a little Jewish lad who taught me my duty as a Christian and a churchman. I had been sitting discontented and rebellious in my own church, because it happened that the ceremonial did not appeal to me—I am not naturally of high church tendencies, but rather a Free Methodist by disposition when a *twelve-years* [sic] *old* lad whose people were orthodox, and who was to be a Rabbi in the family scheme, made a panic in the tenement by announcing that he would not—that *he would rather be a tailor like his father*. When they got the reason out of him, he said: “I don’t want to be a Rabbi when I grow up because I should never be able to find words beautiful enough to speak to God in.” And I saw a great light, and ever after have sat content in my pew—a loyal Churchman.³⁷

Yet these very qualities served to emphasize the uneasy relationship between the Jews’ desire for *kehillah* (community) and Riis’ wish for a homogenous culture. He was uneasy with a self-nurturing impulse for sectarian cultural autonomy, and his early writings temporized about the legitimate nature of Jewish life in a predominantly Christian culture. For example, the very framework of *How the Other Half Lives*, with

its stress upon the tenements as bearing the mark of Cain and, by implication, upon their dwellers as part of a fragmented though formerly harmonious family, came to place the Jew within the context of an imperious recalcitrance, one deliberately opposed to the promises of universalism and a reconstituted community. Writing about a Christian missionary who aroused the Tenth Ward's ire, Riis argued that

As at Jerusalem, the Chief Captain was happily at hand with his centurions, in the person of a sergeant and three policemen, and the preacher was rescued. So, in all matters pertaining to their [Jewish] religious life that tinges all their customs, they stand, these East Side Jews, where the new day that dawned on Calvary left them standing, stubbornly refusing to see the light.³⁸

According to Riis, the East Side Jew clung to an antiquated, outworn history, while satisfying an instinctual avarice made possible by the modern age. Stressing the sheer mystery of Jewish life, he described the noise of "Jewtown" as a "Babel of confusion." The suspender pedlar was "omnipresent and unfathomable" and a visit to a house of mourning spanned "the gap of two thousand years." Just as Judaism would remain stranded on the road to Calvary, the hard struggle for making a living would have its own secular retribution, for "An avenging Nemesis pursues this headlong hunt for wealth" ³⁹ In lines that echo his earlier description of Hamburg's Jewish population, Riis proclaimed that "Thrift is the watchword of Jewtown, as of its people the world over."⁴⁰ (It is important to note that the imperatives for ceaseless struggle, when bleached of their Jewish context, would later evoke praise when Riis in *Theodore Roosevelt the Citizen* would exhort, "'In life, as in a football game, the principle to follow is: Hit the line hard; don't foul and don't shirk, but hit the line hard!'"⁴¹ No less revealingly, he would urge his son John to practice thrift and be careful of prodigal spending.)

As Riis became a national figure, he moderated his public statements about the repugnant—as he saw them—features of Jewish life. He began to see Jewish history as a fearful response to the deteriorating philanthropic spirit of Christian obligation. In "The Tenant" (1899), Riis pointed out that if the slum census-taker had crossed the Bowery,

he would have come upon the refugee Jew, the other economic marplot of whom complaint is made with just reason In fourteen years more than 400,000 Jewish immigrants have landed in New York. They had to have work and food, and they got both as they could. In the strife they developed qualities that were anything but pleasing. They herded like cattle. They had been so herded by Christian rulers, a despised and persecuted race, through the centuries. Their very coming was to escape from their last inhuman captivity in a Christian state. They lied, they were greedy, they were charged with bad faith. They brought nothing—neither money nor artisan skill—nothing but their con-

suming energy, to our land, and their one gift was their greatest offence. One might have pointed out that they had been trained to lie, for their safety; had been forbidden to work at trades, to own land; and been taught for a thousand years, with the scourge and the stake, that only gold would buy them freedom from torture. But what was the use? The charges were true. The Jew was—he still is—a problem of our slum.⁴²

Riis' program for Americanizing the Eastern European Jew depended upon the notion of a dismissible past; the claims of the present would cut the bonds that tied the Jew to an earlier time and place. The modern world could be entered through the door of fraternal, homogenous American life. In the same essay, Riis claimed that

if ever there was material for citizenship, the Jew is such material. Alone of all our immigrants he comes to us without a past. He has no country to renounce, no ties to forget. Within him there burns a passionate longing for a home to call his, a country which will own him, that waits only for the spark of such another love to spring into flame which nothing can quench.⁴³

Riis had met Rabbi Stephen Wise, a member of the Reform wing of Judaism, in Portland, Oregon, and in New York, and I suspect that as their friendship deepened, Riis would come to see the figures of Jewish history related to those of American nationalism. While Wise rejected the spiritually regenerative message of *Ahad Ha'am* and stressed the compatibility of Jewish ethics and American social democracy,⁴⁴ Riis would see the nationalism of the Old Testament as easily transplanted to American shores. Speaking of the Jewish immigrant in 1908, Riis suggested, "Let us make Americans of them, and of their children. Let us tell them of Washington, of Lincoln, of Grant, and set them beside the *heroes of their own lands* And to go back to the days when Jews had a nation and a history of their own, where will you find leaders to set beside Moses, Joshua, and the Maccabees?"⁴⁵ Riis stripped these figures of their redemptive, specifically Zionist prophecies and transformed them into figures bearing universal tidings.

As he grew older, a nostalgic agrarianism pressed its claims more strongly upon him. In his most active years, he had settled in Richmond Hills, Queens—far away from the Five Points and the Bend. In his last years, he bought a farm at Barre, Massachusetts, and proclaimed that "Just now that mission [of the Danish nation] is to teach the world in this *city-mad day* that husbandry, farming, is both patriotic and profitable, as indeed it must be since upon it rests all prosperity of man."⁴⁶ He had found a tactical solution for recovering his past within the context of a salutary enterprise. Earlier, he had been in favor of transplanting the urban poor and laboring classes to abandoned farms: an attractive way of fostering rugged individualism while hacking away at unbridled commerce. He became fascinated with experiments such as Woodbine, run under the auspices of the de Hirsch Fund, which aided

immigrants, especially those from Russia and Roumania, by teaching them trades and agricultural skills. Riis believed that the Jew could regain his inherent dignity and ancient past through a solution similar to his own: he wanted to transform the downtrodden East Side Jew into a figure reminiscent of the Danish farmer.

Recalling a visit to a "struggling Jewish colony" in New Jersey, he remembered walking along a country road at sunset and seeing alongside a horse-drawn cart,

a sunburned, bearded man, with an axe on his shoulder, talking earnestly with his boy, a strapping young fellow in overalls. The man walked as one who is tired after a hard day's work, but his back was straight and he held his head high. He greeted us with a frank nod, as one who meets an equal. . . . This was the Jew of my dream, no longer despised, driven as a beast under impossible burdens, in the Ghetto of men's contempt, but free and his own Master. . . . The Jew redeemed to the soil, to his ancient heritage, a prince among his fellows, a man among men.⁴⁷

No matter how charming the image, it proved unacceptable to the masses of urban Jewry who paid scant attention to the attractions proffered by socialist communes and agricultural cooperatives. Their future was committed to the opportunities of petit-capitalism, the promises of social mobility and educational advantage. They had few illusions, remembering *shtetl* life, about the joy of working the soil.

In private, Riis could be angered by the Jewish community's efforts to prevent civic life's taking on Christian color. His comments were at times petty ("The jews [sic] have long memories," he wrote—speaking of New York elections—to Jane Robbins⁴⁸), at other times defensive and caustic. While it would be rare for him to lapse into the genteel revulsion of his Hamburg sketch, its sentiments could infect his thought. In Alameda, California, he realized he was being underpaid for a tour by his agents and complained to his second wife, "I hate anything that smacks of . . . crookedness. My sub-agents here are Jews."⁴⁹ Responding to the pressures brought to bear in order to halt Christmas celebrations in New York public schools, Riis informed Jane Robbins of his plans, by noting that

. . . I have just written to Mr. Schiff (between you and me) asking him to call off the jews [sic] who are meddling with Xmas festivals in the schools—warning him that *that* thing is loaded. I didn't know they had any Xmas festivals in the schools but since they have, *the Jews* must not question it. If they do they will precipitate trouble they will be sorry for. The reply will come in an inquiry as to how many Jewish teachers there are in those same schools, and what may be *their* influence upon the children, *if that* is their spirit. It is not, but once that dog is loosed, we shall have trouble as they have had abroad, and of peace and good will there will be an end. I for one will not stand it for a moment when it comes to Christmas.⁵⁰

In fact, Riis was familiar with such protests. Though he would staunchly support the right to have such practices continued, he was genuinely unable to understand the Jewish community's fear of enforced conversion and insinuated dogma. By dismissing the Jew's attachment to a past that had taught the need for wariness and skepticism over the promises of political enlightenment, Riis was able to argue sincerely that Christian observance could offend few, even if it took the form of an enlightened Social Gospel. Responding to charges made as early as 1903 that Riis House, as one complaint stated, was "conducted in a spirit not commendable to our [Jewish] people,"⁵¹ Riis argued, "Ours is a Christian settlement. I do not mean by that a sectarian settlement, or a mission. But we wish it understood that we are Christians, and that is why we are there, to bind up the wounds, to help the sick brother, pay his rent for him if need be."⁵²

Yet he was clear about the import of such work, raising if not justifiable concern, legitimate questions about his understanding of religious diversity. He wrote, for example:

We are Christians, but we are not there to proselyte Jewish children or break up homes. We would help build up the home, not break it. We are there to show them, Jews and Gentiles, what Christianity means in dealing with the brother, and if they like it, we shall be glad. So the world is going to be brought to Him who is the Source of all love.⁵³

Riis, of course, was well within his rights. After all, the house had been initially a project of the King's Daughters. Nonetheless, the charges which suggest the uneasiness of the surrounding community did not abate, and Riis' later remarks, though not unsympathetic, indicated his concern about being misunderstood. In 1908, Riis asked his daughter Kate, living in Minneapolis, if she had

heard anything out there of the war that has raged over our settlement here. The Catholic priest and the Jewish rabbi in the neighborhood have jumped on me with all their eight feet, all through Holy Week, declaring me a proselyter and a grafter. I will send you my reply in the *Outlook*. It is all in the day's work, and shows that we are making headway.⁵⁴

In his essay, Riis explained the dispassionate nature of settlement work, a labor that he had seen as an important step in the assimilative process; yet his essay revealed the conflicts between universality and religious particularism that so bedeviled his thought. As he put it, "Once a year, at Christmas, if I am at home, I claim it as my privilege, which nothing can make me surrender, to talk to the people, young and old, of the peace and good will which He came to bring whose birthday we keep, and those who might not wish to come, are then warned to stay away."⁵⁵ He continued by telling his readers that once during Christmas he was in Portland, Oregon, helping a poor family.

He had to leave, “so it was left to a friend there to light the Christmas tree, to hang it with toys and clothing for the children, and to make the father and mother happy. And he did. That friend was the Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, now back in New York, who comes to talk to our children when he can.”⁵⁶ What could the Jewish orthodox, or even labor Zionists, make of that?

Riis’ emphasis on Christian love, not only as a value shared by rational men but also as an act common to all religions, would distort the awesome intrusion of the sacred into the secular and erode the fearful solemnity of a religious engagement of being. Yet love, for Riis, was the center of gravity for the truly religious, and it invariably energized his work and counsel. He spoke of it many times, most eloquently when he charged Riis House’s Board of Advisors to keep the settlement “always faithful to the seal and spirit of our Christian faith, that ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’ Be he Christian, Jew, or pagan,”⁵⁷ and most simply when he advised his son, John, that “you will realize what Jesus meant when he constantly put love of neighbor beside love of God. They are essentially the same thing. You can not love God whom you can not grasp, by Himself alone; but you can love Him through his [sic] children who bear his [sic] image in them. So, all theology becomes simple to me . . . love one another.”⁵⁸ Riis was hard put, though, to accept the consequences. His fervid chauvinism would not rest easily within this creed, and late in life he would be unwilling to distinguish his political values from Christian piety. He would raise, all too easily, the politics of redemption and suggest, by intimation, the backsliding of the Jews—issues that had earlier marked *How the Other Half Lives*. In a draft entitled “On Christianity,” written at Barre, his final home, Riis thrust election issues into sacred history. As he declared,

We can not compromise—“he looks like Him”—“He might be”—Those Jews didn’t want to be unpopular. They knew well enough that the young man was he who was born blind, but they were willing to sneer behind a *coward’s screen to avoid trouble*.

The cowards are not all dead 1900 years ago—how many waited in the last election to make up their minds till *they knew they would win*. They were the moral cowards of our day. They are of no use to the Republic and of none in God’s kingdom, for they would carry the same spirit into that fight. God has no use for cowards. Even the devil has only contempt for them. *No use for trimmers either*. You can not step into the Kingdom of heaven without the pass-word: *Jesus Christ, our Lord*.⁵⁹

The circle had come fully closed: Mrs. Tacchau, the subject of Riis’ anecdote about Jewish life in Ribe, was wrong.

iii

What, then, are we to make of this paradoxical figure Jacob Riis—an immigrant anguished at the wasted lives the tenements spawned, yet

a reporter who argued for severe exclusion at European ports; a devoutly religious man, more temperamentally inclined to the charismatic than formal, yet one who would find little sympathy for the embracing religious character—mystic and hylic—of the orthodox Jew; a writer who would cling to the image of rural Denmark, yet a journalist somewhat contemptuous of a history more exotic than his own; a reporter who would devote his life to writing about and working for a democratic community, yet someone blind to its manifold varieties?

These questions neither belittle Riis's achievements nor make them less variable. They do provide, however, more than a tentative clue to the perplexities faced by Riis as he not only tried to accommodate immigrants to American life, but also strained to acclimatize himself to aspects of immigrant life. His legacy—that beyond his heroic battle with the slums, his work to ensure children the rights to and facilities for a decent education—is the attempt to find the conserving stable traditions of an American nationality (as in his hagiography of Roosevelt) that would splinter what he saw as the abrasive, sectarian features of immigrant characters. Yet the pathos of such an endeavor was that such features had hardened for him into myth; while he eloquently pleaded for a restoration of the human subject within the enterprise of a growing, quantifying sociology, he remained unfortunately blind to desires and hopes other than his own.

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"Ready for the Sabbath Eve in a coal cellar on Ludlow Street." By Jacob A. Riis. With the compliments of the Jacob A. Riis Collection of the Museum of the City of New York.

notes

I would like to thank Professor Jules Chametzky and Sanford Marovitz for their gracious help and advice when I began to undertake this project.

1. See Theodore Roosevelt, "Jacob Riis," *Outlook*, 107 (6 June 1914), 284; Lincoln Steffens, "Jacob A. Riis: Reporter, Reformer, American Citizen," *McClure's*, 21 (August 1903), 419-425; Jane E. Robbins, "A Maker of Americans," *Survey*, 32 (6 June 1914), 285-286.
2. James B. Lane, *Jacob A. Riis and the American City* (Port Washington, New York, 1974), 222.
3. *Ibid.*, x.
4. I say "at best" with good reason, for this problem has received cursory treatment—or none—by Riis' major biographers: Louise Ware, in *Jacob A. Riis; Police Reporter, Reformer, Useful Citizen* (New York, 1938); James Lane, in his previously cited work, and Alexander Alland, in his study emphasizing Riis's photojournalism, *Jacob A. Riis: Photographer & Citizen* (Millerton, N.Y., 1974). The issue has received minor attention in Donald Bigelow's "Introduction" to *How the Other Half Lives* (New York, 1957); Francesco Cordasco's "Introduction" to *Jacob Riis Revisited; Poverty and the Slum in Another Era* (Garden City, 1968); Roy Lubove's now classic study, *The Progressives and the Slums* (Pittsburgh, 1968), and Louis Harap's massive *The Image of the Jew in American Literature* (Philadelphia, 1968). Sam Bass Warner, Jr.'s insightful "Editor's Introduction" to *How the Other Half Lives* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970) is, of necessity, limited to a brief discussion of the problem; nonetheless, his prolegomena is intellectually capacious.
5. See Michael N. Dobkowski, "American Anti-Semitism: A Reinterpretation," *American Quarterly*, 39 (Summer, 1977), 166-181; Louis Harap, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature*; John Higham, *Send These to Me* (New York, 1975), *Strangers in the Land* (New York, 1963); and Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1956).
6. See G. G. Foster's *New York by Gas-Light* (1850), and *New York in Slices* (1852); Henry Adams' *Letters of Henry Adams*, ed. W. C. Ford (Boston, 1930 and 1938), 2 vols.; Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1890); Frank Norris' *McTeague* (1899), *Vandover and the Brute* (1914); Joseph H. Ingraham's *The Prince of the House of David* (1855), *The Pillar of Fire* (1859), and *The Throne of David* (1860); Florence M. Kingsley's *Stephen* (1896), *Paul* (1897), and *The Cross Triumphant* (1898). Dobkowski's above-cited article is especially good at calling attention to Ingraham's and Kingsley's works, as well as to a host of other popular nineteenth-century American novelists who focused upon the Jews as a theologically unasimilable people.
7. James Lane is especially good at bringing to light these problems in *Jacob A. Riis and the American City*. Also, see the following letters: from Niels Riis to Jacob Riis, 28 March 1873; from Jacob Riis to Emma, 10 July 1895; from Jacob Riis to Elizabeth Riis, 21 December 1904 (these are in container 1, Riis papers, Library of Congress); from Jacob Riis to Mary Riis, 1 December 1910; from Jacob Riis to John Riis, 28 July 1911; Jacob Riis to Emma, 5 March 1913 (these are in container 2, Riis papers, Library of Congress). Also, see fugitive letters in Riis papers at Newspaper Division, Forty-Second Street Library, New York, for information about his farm expenses.
8. Anon., "Shadows of a Great City," *Jamestown Journal*, 22 July 1891, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
9. Jacob Riis, "The Man Who Is an Immigrant," *Survey*, 27 (18 February 1911), 868-869.
10. Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York, 1957), 79.
11. *Ibid.*, 37.
12. *Ibid.*, 226.
13. Jacob Riis, *The Battle With the Slum* (New York, 1902), 7.
14. Jacob Riis, *The Children of the Poor* (New York, 1892), 1-2.
15. Jacob A. Riis, Holograph manuscript, "Changing the Slums," 1912, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
16. Jacob A. Riis, Holograph manuscript, "On the Boy Scout Movement," Undated lecture, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
17. Jacob A. Riis, Holograph manuscript, "On Anarchism," approximately 1908, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
18. Jacob A. Riis, undated letter, no addressee given, Riis papers, Cohen Library, City College of New York.
19. Henry Cabot Lodge, "The Restriction of Immigration," *North American Review* (January 1891), 27-36.
20. *How the Other Half Lives*, 16.

21. Edward Saveth, *American Historians and European Immigrants, 1875-1925* (New York, 1948).
22. See Jacob Riis, "The Jews of New York," *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, 13 (January 1896), 58-62.
23. See, for example, Samuel Joseph, *Jewish Immigration to the United States* (New York, 1914); Ronald Sanders, *The Downtown Jews* (New York, 1969); Jules Chametzky, *From the Ghetto* (Amherst, 1977); Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York, 1976), Moses Rischen, *The Promised City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).
24. There is a great deal of commentary about the American transition from community to society. At present, the most recent works are Paul Boyer's *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), Thomas Bender's *Community and Social Change in America* (Rutgers, 1978), Park Dixon Goists's *From Main Street to State Street* (Port Washington, 1977); I'm also indebted to such works as Jean Quandt's *From the Small Town to the Great Community* (Rutgers, 1970), R. Jackson Wilson's *In Quest of Community* (New York, 1968), Anselm Strauss' *Images of the American City* (Glencoe, 1961), and, of course, Roy Wiebe's *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967).
25. Anon., "Children of the Tenements," *New York Mail and Express* (29 March 1895), Riis papers, Library of Congress.
26. Jacob Riis, *The Old Town* (New York, 1909), 32-33.
27. *Ibid.*, 128.
28. *Ibid.*, 56-57.
29. Letter from Niels Riis to Jacob Riis, 18 March 1873, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
30. Jacob Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York, 1925), 46.
31. Jacob Riis, *The Methodist Spirit: A Tribute* (no date given, no pagination given), Riis papers, Library of Congress.
32. Jacob A. Riis, "Across the Ocean: Leaves from the Journal of a Traveler," *South Brooklyn News*, 4 March 1876, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
33. Jacob A. Riis, "Are We So Soon Forgot," *New York World*, 2 October 1883, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
34. Jacob A. Riis, ms. "Chautauqua Lecture," (Summer, 1908), n.p., Riis papers, Library of Congress.
35. Jacob A. Riis, "The Making of Thieves in New York," *Century*, 27 (November 1894), 109-116.
36. Jacob Riis, "Playgrounds for City Schools," *Century*, 26 (September 1894), 666.
37. Jacob A. Riis, "Speech," Harlan, Iowa, 1907, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
38. *How the Other Half Lives*, 82-83. Three years later, Josiah Strong, in *The New Era or the Coming Kingdom*, would echo these lines, by declaiming that "The first city was built by the first murderer, and crime and vice have festered in it ever since" (New York, 1893), 202.
39. *How the Other Half Lives*, 79.
40. *Ibid.*, 78.
41. Jacob Riis, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen* (New York, 1903), 21.
42. Jacob Riis, "The Tenant," *Atlantic*, 84 (August 1899), 157.
43. *Ibid.*, 157.
44. Melvin Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust* (New York, 1976), 128.
45. "Chautauqua Lecture," (Summer, 1908).
46. Jacob Riis, "Commencement Address, Barre, Massachusetts High School," (no date given, no page given), Riis papers, Library of Congress.
47. Speech, "On Jews," (no date), Riis papers, Library of Congress.
48. Jacob Riis to Jane Robbins, 27 October 1906, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
49. Jacob Riis to Mary Riis, 11 February 1907, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
50. Jacob Riis to Jane Robbins, 26 December 1906, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
51. Mr. A. Lucas to Jacob A. Riis, 1903, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
52. Jacob Riis, "Jacob A. Riis on the New York City Election," *The Churchman*, 190 (21 November 1903), 646.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Jacob A. Riis to Kate Riis, 24 April 1908, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
55. Jacob Riis, "What Settlements Stand For," *Outlook*, 89 (9 May 1908), 70.
56. *Ibid.*, 71.
57. Jacob Riis, "Will," 7 November 1911, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
58. Jacob Riis to John Riis, 9 October 1905, Riis papers, Library of Congress.
59. Jacob Riis, Ms., "On Christianity," (no date), Riis papers, Library of Congress.