

Israel as a Jewish State

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Shlomo Fischer :: The Place of Religion in Israel



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The Problem of the Place of Religion in Israel

- The Israeli state and society think of themselves in a rough way as secular.
- Central spheres of government and social life are clearly liberated from religious control, especially the law, the political sphere, the economy, the military.

At the same time

- there are serious departures from any rigorous model of secularism.
- Israel has a religion which is clearly privileged by the State – Orthodox Judaism
- . There are areas of law – notably personal status, marriage and divorce which the state has given over to the control of the clergy.T
- The state supports Jewish religious education.

How to explain this particular pattern, this particular interweaving of secular and non-secular elements?

I would suggest that in the case of Israel (and in the case of Turkey) the main spring of secularism has been the reordering of Jewish collective identity, not necessarily the realization of liberal values.

Traditionally, the Jews constructed their Jewish collective identity as a “people” – an ethno-national entity who would realize its true nature, well-being and *telos* through the individual and collective observance of the Jewish religion (Halacha).

Zionism or Jewish Nationalism claims that the true nature and well being, the *telos*, of the Jewish people can only be realized through the realization of Jewish national existence.

The point was to allow Jewish national existence to formulate and realize its own autonomous national goals:

The creation of a viable territorial state, viable national culture, and modern political system.

Put Differently...

The nationalist project is part of the project of modernization – where modernization is understood as obtaining the material benefits of modernity - modern political technology as well as military advances etc. also industrialization or productivization.

Traditional religion is deemed inimical to the secularizing modern project.

To accomplish its aims the modernizing nationalist project has to be liberated from the restrictions and tutelage of the traditional *Galuti* Jewish religion.

To a certain extent, (as in the Turkish case) this involved practices and social organization that was reminiscent of the anti-religion French and general catholic cases and the east European cases (including Russian communism).

However religion remains an intrinsic part of the national project

Most importantly, it plays a role in the determination and definition of national membership (This was not always obvious but it was ironed out over time)

This role is mainly negative: You cannot belong to another religion and be considered a member of the Jewish nationality.

- Hans Herzl, Coalition crisis of 1958, Brother Daniel Rufheisen.
- This is the secular decision of the Supreme Court (Rufheisen).

Religion is intrinsically involved in national identity and in the public sphere

“Belonging without Believing”

- Religion as Public utility – public religious facilities utilized on life cycle events by general public.
- “Secular Jews” (like secular Muslims in Bosnia) are non-religious in private life but use public religion as utility provided by State.
- Public place of religion not an interest only of the observant public (*Datiim*)

What Jewish national secularization seeks is not separation from religion but rather autonomy from religious control and the subordination of religion to the national principle.

- Religious control of marriage and divorce irks is tolerated (at least in part) because religious endogamy is considered to be in the national interest.
- The state supports religious education because enhanced religious membership is considered to be enhanced national membership.
- What the state guards against is loss of subordination of religion.

- What the state guards against is loss of subordination of religion.
- The difference between Haredim and National religious is precisely this issue of the control of religion by nationalism

Conclusion I

- Because religion is relevant to the national project – There always remains the possibility of reinterpreting the national project in an integral, religiously explicit fashion- as opposed to the more classical secularist mode.
- This is what is represented by the right religious bloc.

This does not necessarily imply a change in the institutional control of religion. But the nationalist state that does the controlling itself changes and hence the outcome of the control can change.

Conclusion II

- Israel follows a European/Turkish model of secularization – not an American one of separation of Church and State.
- Widespread expectation for religion to have some sort of public role.
- The question is what *sort* of role – closed, exclusivist, xenophobic? Or inclusivist, open and democratic?