

RELIGION AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL

by

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Relations between religion and the state of Israel cannot properly be understood without basic reference to the process of Jewish national reconstitution in this country. This element is patently absent from the European scene, where national and political factors are more or less settled and there is a long history of ecclesiastical involvement. The position likewise differs in the U. S. A. which is not burdened with an age-old tradition.

Persistent attempts at drawing an analogy between the European and American scenes and Israel merely serve tendentious interests. They do not help clarify the problem. It is a significant fact that in Israel religion does not constitute an independent power factor in the political or economic sense. The often heard charge of "religious coercion" also needs re-examining in the light of the Israeli scene. Generally this has been understood as forcing the individual to act in contrast to his religious convictions. In this country, however, it denotes any requirement to conform for religious usage. Thus, for example, Sunday laws abroad, limiting *inter alia* entertainment, are not usually classed as "religious coercion". In Israel, however, there is an outcry against any Sabbath restriction. The epithet is even applied to the demand of granting legal status to the deceased and his family in the anatomy and pathology law, or the prohibition to raise pork.

The crucial element in the Israeli situation is no doubt the fact that in a country largely composed of immigrants, who continue to come in, the national character is necessarily in a state of flux. What indeed shall be the physiognomy of the new state? This is the question. Either it will emerge from the traditional Jewish heritage in association with elements of modern civilisation, or it will be an outgrowth of Western culture with a sprinkling of Jewish folklore. In Israel it is within this all-important context that the question of religion and state ought to be viewed.

Israel has undertaken the unique task of resuming the threads of an ancient tradition in the service of national reconstruction. This has no historical parallel. Unfortunately immigrants with a more sophisticated Western

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background often lack substantive Jewish roots and thus regard the norms of their own society as definitive. Their attitude towards traditional values is at best indifferent. A typical example of this is the reluctance to base legislation on original Hebrew law, a poignant expression of the Jewish genius, which has proved its viability throughout history.

Immigrants coming from a less developed background posed a different problem. Efforts were made to transpose them into the twentieth century at maximum speed with little regard for their own indigeneous, religiously impregnated culture. This has produced lack of self-confidence, loss of bearing and a decline of Jewish content.

Cultural issues in Israel are thus naturally charged with a religious tension – considered positive by the traditionalist and negative by the secularist. Mediaeval obscurantism and Neturei Karta are the stock in trade in-vective employed by the anti-religious against the traditionalists. Lack of appreciation for the role of religion has in turn produced an ultra-conservatism shunning bold solutions even in such vital spheres as security and other essential services. The reigning atmosphere became one of recrimination where even such demands as free education in a traditional spirit, burial regulations and the natural right of like-minded citizens to form their own party were decried as religious coercion. More and more the religious community's stance on the religion and state issue became coloured by a feeling of discrimination, and shock at opportunities being withheld from the traditionalist on account of his Sabbath observance.

A highly developed sense of history and readiness to forego is essential if Israel is to retain its ties with the past. Secularist attempts at defining a "national tradition" that was unrelated to the religious heritage have failed to yield positive results. So has the view that anything produced in Israel was necessarily Jewish. Both attitudes entail total severance with the past. In the traditional camp historical consciousness might not be readily apparent but there is a keen awareness of recurrent national disaster throughout the ages, attributed to divine retribution. Religious opposition to the separation of religion and state cannot be grasped without reference to this background. Fear of becoming second class citizens in a country where most services are provided by the state was another consideration. But there is also an overriding preoccupation with national unity. The introduction of civil marriage would split the Jewish people into two distinct communities unable to intermarry. A modicum of Sabbath observance in public life is likewise essential to the preservation of an undivided national community. The traditionalist camp in Israel has no illusions on the immediate prospects of the struggle for the cause of Judaism at a time of secularist ascendancy the world over. The conviction, however, that the separation of religion and state can only lead to gradual estrangement from the mainspring of Jewish existence leaves no room for an alternative course. Political parties are hardly

the most welcome instrument for the furtherance of religious objectives, but the degree of party involvement in all aspects of Israeli public life makes recourse to it unavoidable. Moreover it is felt that Judaism being concerned with the totality of life, the religious community ought to steer a definite course in the political sphere as well.

At the same time it is realized that since questions of faith cannot be settled by force, it is necessary to find a *modus vivendi*. Once moderates on both sides realize that they are partners in the preservation of the national weal, the solution of the issue of religion and state will not fail to materialize.

Summary by Avner Tomaschoff