

Modernization as a Condition, not a Uniform Period of Time

Explaining Why Religious Traditions Change, Illustrated by Judaism

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I. What Do We Mean by “Modernization”?

When people speak of modernization, they take for granted they talk about a period of time that exhibits distinctive traits. The “modern period” in the history of the West, beginning for diverse religions at diverse times, is marked by secularization, political change in the status of religious institutions of governance, disestablishment of religion and loosening of the religious bonds that hold together in tight little islands of faith the communities of the faithful. So, in all, the modern period finds its definition in the diminution of religiosity and the increase of a secular viewpoint. The Enlightenment not only produced the generic religiosity, deism, in place of the particularities of Christianity, it also left in ruins the cathedrals of faith and religious culture that formed the monuments of the Middle Ages, that “age of faith.”

For the study of Judaism and Christianity, that characterization of the meaning of modernization — the temporal meaning, part of the periodization of culture from ancient to medieval to modern — should yield the markers of secularization and the signs of the death of religiosity. But while after two hundred years of modernization of Judaism and perhaps three hundred of Christianity, the bare ruined choirs open to the rain signal the death of religion, we tend to forget that alongside, religion flourishes. In that same modern age in which marriage and the conventional family decay and reverence for life extends to insects but not to unborn babies, half the US population opposes abortion and well over two thirds oppose same-sex marriage in the name of religious conviction. And if American exceptionalism be invoked to explain away the data of flourishing religion in its conventional forms, we need only to look to Islam for ample evidence to contradict the prevailing dogma of the death of God. The historical religions of humanity east and west continue to define culture and animate everyday lives of billions of people.

Alongside, we recognize, religions not only osmose, they atrophy and lose purchase on the cultures of nations where they historically flourished, England if not Poland, for example.

We are ill equipped to make sense of the age in which we live, therefore, if we dismiss religion as a vestige of a dead past. A story of what is at stake captures the matter. In June 1999, I was invited as the only scholar of Religious Studies to a U.S. Department of Defense-sponsored conference in Washington D.C. on America's defense requirements twenty-five years hence, in 2025. The question was, How could we prepare even now for dangers beyond the near horizon? Along with an anthropologist from Columbia University, I tried to win to the parlous and threatening condition of world religions the attention of the assembled admirals and generals, economists, sociologists, political scientists, international bankers, journalists, senators, and other worldly figures. At the public sessions, I heard much about economic threats, political concerns, pressures of population and dangers to the ecological balance that sustains us all. No one dreamt of introducing religion or suggesting that religious convictions, like those of Communism for three prior generations, could lead to attacks on the American homeland. I did not even try.

When in a break-out session, I pointed out that religions possess their own rationality, with which we must learn to engage, and that for vast populations of humanity the religious vocation is not irenic and certainly not favorable to this country, I elicited disdain. After I said that I thought we will have to take seriously the power of religion in global affairs, a professor from Yale disgustedly turned his back on me entirely, and others in the room dismissed the notion with derision. The Yale professor explicitly said he saw no reason to have a Divinity School at Yale or to study religion in any manner. Others, more courteously, proved equally dismissive: on what basis should we consider that proposition that religion possesses power to threaten the social order and national interests of the USA, as had Communism in the prior century? This was before 9/11/01.

I am confident that, now, no one any more would turn away from the proposition that in the national interest we must understand what religions are and how they work. And few take seriously the once-well-established proposition that religion is dying out and reason or secularism or atheism replaces it. Religion remains a singularly powerful force in human affairs. We who study it are now learning to treat religion as an independent variable, explaining other phenomena but not explained away by them. No one has ventured to explain the Islamic war against the USA as a function of psychology or a response to economic or class interest, as psychology and sociology have been accustomed to do for some generations now. But how are we to explain religion in its own terms?

II. Modernization as a condition, not a temporal measure

Clearly, we live in a period that we should characterize differently from the age that has gone before. But modernization is not a time of secularization, when religion flourishes. The modern period is marked by the competition between religion and secularity, and by competition between and among formulations of received religion. As to the former, no one can any longer imagine we live in an age of secularity that follows upon an age of faith. We live in an age of intense faith that clashes with militant secularism. As to the latter, the long period in which religious traditions exhibited if not uniformity then at least coherence, if not a perfect consensus then a cogent set of consistent alternatives, has ended. Now there is more than Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christianity; there is more than a uniform Judaism marked by local variations; and the civil wars that are breaking over Islam have ended the notion of a single, unitary, harmonious Islamic construction of Shia and Sunni streams. So modernity is marked by fissiparous tendencies within religious communities, an end to coherent religious communities, but not an end to religiosity, rather an intensification.

To state matters in concrete terms, the Hasidic faithful dressed for the Sabbath in the manner of the Polish nobility of the eighteenth century and doing so in the name of the Torah live in the same modern age as the short-sleeved, short pants young men and women of the Conservative Judaic summer camps, Camp Ramah, and the secular Jews of the Jewish Federation philanthropies, with their intense interest in politics and liberal causes, are exact contemporaries of — live cheek by jowl with — the spiritual seekers of New Age Judaism, Jewish renewal, and the seekers of Qabbalah or mystical experience, who flourish in the very neighborhood in which we live in the central Hudson Valley. Modernity is not an age that overspreads the world and changes everything in a single direction. It is a condition that produces more complex phenomena than people anticipated, in prior generations, in matters of religion and culture. So the question presents itself: how do we account for changes in religious traditions in the history of religions? And to what do we attribute the variations of received religious traditions, the diversity of modern times?

III. What Changes to Make an Age Modern: Three Theses

Religions persist when the questions they answer prove urgent, and they lose purchase on those that identify other urgent questions, different from the established ones. Judaism in modern times produced a variety of systems, some answer one question, some answer

another. In modern times, diverse Judaic systems answer diverse questions, and those who find their questions urgent deem the answers to be self-evidently valid. When, in the case of Judaism, we know someone's politics, we also know what he ate for breakfast — or did not eat.

Let me now present a field-theory of the history of Judaism in modern times, meant to explain in a cogent way what has happened since the eighteenth century: why Judaism changed after long centuries of stability. It is worked out through three theses, one on the history of Judaism, the other two on the nature of religion as exemplified by the history of Judaism, with special interest in the modern and contemporary period.

The first thesis is as follows: Judaism as it flourished in the West was born in the encounter with Christianity in the definition in which Christianity defined the civilization of the West, and that same Judaism lost its power to persuade some Jews of its self-evident truth when Christianity did.

The second, on what we learn about religion from the history of Judaism, is this: no Judaism — hence, as a matter of hypothesis, no religious system — recapitulates any other of its species let alone of the genus, religion. Each religious system begins on its own and then — only then — goes back to the received documents in search of texts and proof-texts. Every Judaism therefore commences in the definition (to believers: the discovery) of its canon. All Judaisms therefore testify to humanity's power of creative genius: making something out of nothing. That something, that system, serves to suit a purpose, to solve a problem, in our context, to answer through a self-evidently right doctrine a question that none can escape or ignore.

The third thesis concerns the nature of religion in a time of change, such as the modern age of the death of Judaism and the birth of Judaisms has been, and proposes to account for the on-going formation of new religious systems, the new Judaisms which take up inescapable questions and produce ineluctable answers. The thesis is as follows: religion recapitulates resentment. A generation that reaches the decision to change expresses resentment of its immediate setting and therefore its past, its parents, as much as it proposes to commit itself to something better, the future it proposes to manufacture. So when, in the second of the three theses, I say that the urgent question yields its self-evidently true answer, my meaning is this: resentment produces resolution. The two, when joined, form a religious system.

IV. Religious Change in Response to Political Challenge

At issue is how in particular ideas relate to the political circumstances of the people who hold those ideas. Religion as a fact of politics

constitutes a principal force in the shaping of society and imagination alike, while politics for its part profoundly affects the conditions of religious belief and behavior. So I want to know how a stunning shift in the political circumstance of a religion affected that religion's thought about perennial questions. In fact, I deal with two moments of fundamental and radical change, one at the beginning, the other at the end, of the history of a religious system.

Clearly, I regard religion as a social fact, not merely as a set of beliefs on questions viewed in an abstract and ahistorical setting. Hence I do not analyze religious questions alone or mainly as problems of the interplay of received proof-texts and internal logic. Rather, I want to know the relationship between religious ideas and the circumstances, in particular in politics, of the society that holds them. So I treat the human being as a political animal and religion too as something people do together.

Not only so, but — to continue the idiom just now used — a Judaism is something Jews do not by themselves but in the context of a larger world, in the West, Jews “do Judaism” among Christians “doing Christianity,” — and in response to that circumstance and setting. Historians of Judaism take as dogma the view that Christianity never made any difference to Judaism (and more than did Islam, a totally distinct set of problems). Faith of a “people that dwells apart” (these historians hold) Judaism went its splendid, solitary way, exploring paths untouched by Christians. Christianity (the theory goes) was born in the matrix of Judaism, but Judaism, from then to now, officially ignored the new “daughter” religion and followed its majestic course in aristocratic isolation. Since, moreover, Judaism (in any form) is supposed always to have ignored, and never to have been affected by, Christianity in any form, (the implicit argument), the future security of the faith of Judaism requires continuing this same policy, pretending that Christianity simply never made, and does not now make, any difference at all to Israel, the Jewish people.

In modern times a long-established system of Judaism formed in ancient days — a worldview, way of life, addressed to a distinctive Israel, framed in response to urgent and perennial questions — lost its paramount position. That received Judaic system gave way to new Judaisms — that is, Judaic systems, each with its own set of self-evidently true answers to ineluctable questions. Each of these systems in its way claimed to take the natural next step in “Jewish history,” or in the “tradition” or to constitute the increment of Judaism (the tradition) in its unfolding, linear history. All of them were wrong, and, in erring gloriously in perfect self-delusion, each one has testified to the powerful imagination of humanity, to the courage of people to face urgent questions and to compose, in solving them, systems of belief and behavior capable of creating whole worlds of meaning: sensibility and sense alike.

V. Reform or New beginning?

Let me spell out what I believe to be at stake in the interpretation of the Judaic systems of the modern and contemporary age: are they what they say they are, which is reversion or reform? or are they what in perspective of the ages they prove to be, which is, all of them not rebirths but new beginnings, each one on its own not a recapitulation nor replication but a reworking of the received in the formation of a new given. I maintain that the Judaic systems — the Judaisms — of the nineteenth and twentieth century constitute, each on its own, a new birth, not a reversion or a reform. The received Judaism of the dual Torah did not undergo a midlife crisis, for those whose questions that system did not address, that Judaism died. And the Judaism that did answer urgent questions for its devotees was born, not reborn (though they ordinarily said that is all it was).

To phrase matters in not so homely terms, we sort out the difference between an incremental theory of the history of Judaism, in which, in a single line from Sinai, a long line of yesterdays leads directly to whatever we are and believe today, and the theory that there is no single Judaism, therefore no history of Judaism at all, only a sequence of fresh initiatives, new Judaisms resting on a long sequence of matters of self-evidence. My view is that there is not now, and never has been, a single Judaism, but only Judaisms, each with its distinctive system and new beginning, all resorting to available antecedents and claiming they are precedents, but in fact none with a history prior to its birth. Each system begins on its own, in response to a circumstance that strikes people as urgent and a question they find ineluctable.

What forms the facts people deem compelling and probative is what the earliest generations of the new Judaism find self-evident, the truths that demand no articulation, no defense, no argument. What is self-evident forms the system and defines its generative exegetical principles. And if I want to know what people find self-evident, I have to uncover the questions they confront and cannot evade. These questions will dictate the program of inquiry, the answers to which then follow after the fact. If I know what issues of social existence predominate, I can also uncover the point — the circumstance — of origin of a Judaism. To be sure, no one claims to know the source of urgent questions: whether political, whether cultural, whether formed within the received condition of the faith, whether framed by forces outside. Debates on such issues of beginnings rarely yield consensus. The reason is simple. In the end no one is present at the beginning, so we have no information to settle any important questions. We work our way back from the known to the unknown. But all we wish to know is whether what we trace is old and continuous, as its apologists invariably claim, or essentially new

and creative, a testimony to human will and human power and human intellect, as I maintain it is: a new Judaism, for a new circumstance.

The birth of the Rabbinic system that flourished in the West from the fourth century onward took place in the year 312, the year of Constantine's vision at the Milvian Bridge of a cross and the words, "By this sign you will conquer." That same Judaism died — ceased to impress nearly all Jews as self-evidently true — in the year 1789, with the American Constitution and the French Revolution, which for the first time established in the West a politics distinct from Christianity. With Constantine Christianity became the definitive power in the politics of the West, and with the American Constitution and the French Revolution Christianity began its journey out of the political arena. The Judaism of the dual Torah responded to a political question, and the Judaisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries addressed political change, and, finally, crisis and catastrophe.

Political change therefore takes the critical role in shaping theological discourse. Specifically, the Judaism that took shape in the fourth century, in response to the political triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire, governed the mind and imagination of Israel in Christendom for the next fifteen hundred years. The reason, I hold, is that that Judaism, for Israel, dealt effectively with the urgent issues deriving from the world defined by regnant Christianity. Received for that long epoch as self-evidently true, that same Judaism began to strike some Jews as not at all self-evident at that point, and in those places, at which Christianity (in one version or another) lost control of the politics of the West. When Christianity no longer governed the political life and therefore also the symbolic transactions of the West, the Judaism that had taken shape in response to triumphant Christianity and had so long and so successfully sustained the life of Israel, the Jewish people, confronted skeptical questioning among people now standing essentially outside of its system of truths beyond all argument.

That is why I say Judaism was born in 312 and began to meet competition from other Judaic systems in the aftermath of 1789. But of course there is more to it than that. New Judaisms took shape, dealing with other agenda of urgent questions and answering those questions in ways self-evidently right for those who believed. Each of these Judaisms claimed to continue in linear succession the Judaism that had flourished for so long, to develop in an incremental succession and so to connect, through the long past, to Sinai.

Why does the fourth century mark so critical an era in the history of Judaism? Because that was when the Judaism that would flourish in the West came to full definition and expression — and so did the Christianity that would define the civilization of the West for nineteen hundred years. The fourth century therefore marked the

beginning, in a terrible union of cobra and mongoose, of the two great religious traditions of the West, unequal in numbers but well matched in intellectual resources, Christianity and Judaism. While Christianity took shape around its own issues, the Judaism of the responded in a profound way to the challenge of Christianity in its triumphant form. Had a Judaism not done so, no Judaism could have survived the amazing events of that era: conversion of the enemy to the persecuted faith. For Jews had to sort out the issues defined by the triumph of Christianity as well as their own disappointment of the same age. And, through the ages, they succeeded in doing so.

The Judaism that would thrive, that is, the Judaic system of the dual Torah, came to expression in the matrix of Christianity. Before that time, the Christian and Judaic thinkers had not accomplished the feat of framing a single program for debate. Judaic sages had earlier talked about their issues to their audience, Christian theologians had for three centuries pursued their arguments on their distinctive agenda. The former had long pretended the latter did not exist. Afterward the principal intellectual structures of a distinctive Judaism — the definition of the teleology, method, and doctrine of that Judaism — reached definition and ample articulation. Each of these components of the system met head-on and in a fundamental way the challenge of politically regnant Christianity. The Judaic answers to the Christian *défi*, for believing Israel remained valid as a matter of self-evidence so long as Christianity dictated the politics in which the confrontation of Judaism and Christianity would take place.

And when Christianity ceased to dictate on its own the regnant issues of politics and culture, the counterpart Judaism met competition from new systems that addressed new questions. Then variation and change go together: most of those Jews who lived in Christian countries, Poland, Ukraine, Rumania, Hungary, for example, found little to engage their interest in Reform Judaism, while most of those in political circumstances defined in other terms, Germany, Britain, the USA and France, found much. And that case drawn from Judaism illustrates why in the history of religion change takes place.

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