

What Orthodoxy?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Modern, Centrist, Enlightened Orthodoxy (no one knows quite what to call it) is dead. [The alarm bells are ringing all around the Jewish world as a result of the recent decision of the rabbinical courts in Israel to question thousands of conversions](#), both in Israel and the Diaspora, performed by rabbis considered too modern/unreliable/suspect/not kosher enough/not subservient enough, even if nominally Orthodox. The creeping takeover of Orthodoxy by right-wing, Charedi, ultra-Orthodox, extremist, fundamentalists, non- or anti-Zionists, however you feel like classifying them, seems to have been going on for years, but now it is accelerating. Where once the Israeli state rabbinate was seen as a bulwark against this process, now it has been taken over, just as a cuckoo's baby throws all the other eggs out of the nest. The Judaism that calls itself Orthodox, in all its varieties, is experiencing a "Kulturkampf"—a struggle between two different approaches, not a battle between two different religious expressions.

I am not as worried as some others are. Israel is a very specific problem. Ever since religious parties entered government and negotiated deals for a state-funded, centralized rabbinic authority, with its control over personal status and its rival Ashkenazi and Sefardi Chief Rabbis, religious life in Israel has always been a highly politicized battlefield.

The Charedi world has found that using religion as a political tool brings with it financial benefits, state subsidies, welfare, and power. They have developed political strategies to maximise influence and gain. The need to find jobs for scholars in the yeshiva world also led to a slow process of infiltration into the mainstream rabbinate. Many nonreligious observers saw this as a positive thing because it involved them in the democratic political process.

At the same time, the Orthodox Zionist movements flourished, particularly on the West Bank. They, too, assert independence and political power. Religious life in Israel has been changing, fragmenting, and regrouping in many directions. The current Charedi takeover of the Rabbinate is as much a sign of the failures of the Rabbinate as the machinations of the Charedi politicians. The Rabbinate has failed to speak to the majority of secular and moderate Israelis.

This Charedi imperialism is not as frightening nor as likely to lead to a further split within Orthodoxy as is suggested. The fact is that all variations of Orthodoxy are committed to the same halachic constitution. The spectrum of Orthodoxy agrees that the halachic process is the lynchpin of Jewish commitment. The differences are more of attitude (social and intellectual), and peripherals like dress. It's a matter of style and degree, rather than fundamentals. It is true that the Charedi world is less open, less conciliatory, and less willing to compromise. Other branches of Orthodoxy are more flexible. But it is also true that in the Diaspora, in

particular, flexibility has been abused. Just as interesting is the fact that some of the worst abuses of conversion for money have come from some of the more Charedi authorities.

I believe the current brouhaha will simply speed up the necessary process of separating state from religion in Israel. The free-for-all American model is much healthier than the centralized, politicized Israeli version. Such a separation will strengthen the alternatives. Into the vacuum will step varieties such as exciting new rabbis of the Religious Kibbutz Movement, the rabbis of Tzohar, those being trained at Bar Ilan University and the great moderate Zionist yeshivas like Gush.

Anyway, the Charedi world is itself highly fractured, and there are moderating influences as well as divisive ones. Authorities cannot agree, whether it is Land for Peace or whether to allow Hasidic pop concerts. Large numbers who outwardly conform, completely ignore many of the rulings they privately disagree with. There is tension between the rival Hasidic dynasties and within them. We are living in a postmodern world, where religion is primarily a mechanism for social solidarity. Individuals want to feel they belong with the holy, good guys and this is their "indulgence". They do not want to be seen rocking the boat or undermining.

Orthodoxy is indeed a mess of conflicting authorities and empires, but it's alive. There are choices, and above all we are free to choose! So is the modern/moderate Orthodox position lost? Well, it depends on how you define it. If "modern" means weak compromise, wishy-washy, gutless inconsistency, well then it deserves to wither.

I always used to find the term "modern" offensive, because it implied that new was good but old was not. That, of course, offends my sense of commitment to an ancient tradition. Carl Jung describes modern man thus:

The man whom we can with justice call "modern" is solitary. He is so of necessity and at all times, for every step towards a fuller consciousness of the present removes him further from his original "participation mystique" with the mass of men—from submersion in a common unconscious. Every step forward means an act of tearing himself loose from that all-embracing pristine unconsciousness which claims the bulk of mankind almost entirely.

[\(Modern Man in Search of a Soul\)](#)

Jung did not mean that modern man needs to reject the past or is "lonely". On the contrary, as a committed Christian he thought the religious soul and tradition to be essential for a fully balanced person. But to achieve mental health a thinking person has to struggle with making sense of the world as he sees it and cannot rely exclusively on the past for all the answers to the challenges of the human condition in the present (though it may have some).

And this is what differentiates "us", the thinking Orthodox, from "them", the reactionaries. It's not the degree of learning, or the desire to be stricter

than the law requires. It is, at root, one of attitude and whether the past is the all-embracing, all-answering golden age, whether the poverty-ridden stinking ghettos of Eastern Europe are to be looked back to with nostalgia.

We believe halacha constantly modifies without destroying itself. As with any constitution, the experts waver and disagree, and at different times respond in different ways. The real flashpoint is over freedom of individual thought, not halachic strictness. And this is the "Kulturkampf," the cultural battle between the values of a free society versus the controls of the ghetto. Thank goodness, nowadays we have choices, and one of them is freedom of thought and expression. The role of Thinking Orthodoxy is to make sure the alternatives are not forgotten and remain in the marketplace of ideas for intellectual fashions to change. Until that is in danger, I'm a happy bunny.