

Israeli Theocracy

In the febrile political polemic of our times, language is a victim as people use words loosely, inaccurately, and without thinking of their significance or meaning. The most obvious is how the term Nazi is applied to anyone or any idea that one does not like!

There is a lot of talk about Israel becoming a theocracy. But what exactly do we mean by a theocracy? If a theocracy means that religions influence the affairs of the state, well then, most countries in the world allow religion some degree of a say in their affairs.

In Britain, the monarch is still the Head of the Church of England which has certain privileges such as bishops sitting in the House of Lords, and state funding for the church and religious schools. Does that make it a theocracy? The United States talks far more than Britain does about being One Nation Under God. Despite the separation of State and Religion on paper, religions get preferential tax treatment and other benefits. States make laws based on the influence of different religious minorities within them. Does that make the United States a theocracy?

Afghanistan and Iran are examples of theocracies. But have we reached a stage in Israel where the religious parties have or are likely to have an absolute say on what goes on in every area of national life? Israel indeed describes itself as a Jewish state. But this is no worse than those countries whose populations are mainly Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Shinto and recognize their significance. Are they all theocracies?

In the ancient world kings were the representatives of the gods and worked together (most of the time) with priests. You might say that Israel under Moses was a theocracy but then so were all other countries in those days. Is Netanyahu Moses? Many of the Biblical Judges were not religious leaders. Some were gangsters. The Judean kings were subject to the "constitution" of the Torah in theory. But most of them were perfectly happy worshipping other gods and abandoning their own. And we won't even mention the kings of Israel.

Or take the Hasmonean dynasty during the second temple. The kings were high priests too. But they were hardly theocratic leaders, more sympathetic to Greek culture than to Jewish, and usually persecuted the religious leaders. And even the Sanhedrin included a very wide range of members from different backgrounds and ideologies.

The emperor Constantine made Christianity the State Religion of the Roman empire. And that was how it remained except for a brief interlude when the emperor Julian tried to return the empire to sanity and freedom of religious practice. And the blessed Goths, Vandals, and Visigoths returned to the good old pagan days for a while.

The Holy Roman Empire was an example of the Pope controlling the monarchs. You might have heard of the famous humiliation of the emperor Henry the

4th whom Pope Gregory 4th in 1077 threatened to excommunicate unless he submitted to his authority. The poor fellow walked the walk of shame to Canossa castle barefoot to show who was boss. Most of the expulsions and oppression of Jews under the Holy Roman Empire came at the insistence of the Church rather than the monarchs. Even if they were on paper the rulers of their countries although plenty of them adopted negative papal attitudes toward Jews. In practice, the church was in control until the time of Napoleon. And even he made a concordat with the Catholic Church to keep it quiet. Was he a theocrat? In Italy, the Catholic Church only lost control of the secular state at the end of the 19th century and remained in power only in the Vatican.

Judaism lost its independence and lived under other rulers for two thousand years. The most significant example of Jewish self-rule under Christianity the Council of the Four Lands in Poland and Lithuania during the 16th and 17th centuries. Each community sent 3 representatives to their meetings, a rabbi and two leaders. Decisions were taken by majority vote. Was that a theocracy?

As for those who fear a religious takeover, just look at the religious world in Israel. So fractious, competitive, and argumentative. Each Chassidic dynasty is either divided or in competition with the other. The Lithuanians do not get on with the mystics or the *Sephardim* with the *Ashkenazim*. The Religious nationalists don't get on with *Satmar* who doesn't even deign to participate in political life. The so-called religious parties always split and often will not work with each other. Do you really think they will all come together to rule as a theocracy? They wouldn't be able to choose a Sanhedrin. They couldn't even run a football team let alone a country.

I would like to see the separation of religion and state. But even if religion has a say in the life of the country, there is still plenty of freedom and ways around restrictions. Most of the present Knesset is not orthodox. Haifa and Tel Aviv now probably have as many non-kosher restaurants as kosher ones, and local municipalities make their own rules on many religious issues.

Don't panic. And even if the Messiah does come, most Israelis won't recognize him (or her). Nil Desperandum, or if you prefer, *Yihyeh Tov*, it will be OK!