Religious Roots of a Political Ideology: Judaism and Christianity at the Cradle of Zionism

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Abstract

Albeit overtly secular, Zionist ideology was inspired by religious thought. While traditional religions often supported the nationalist cause, the relationship of Judaism and Zionism is vastly different. Adepts of traditional Judaism immediately rejected Zionism, and this rejectionist attitude has not vanished to this day. On the other hand, Christian, mainly Protestant theologians had developed the idea of the ingathering of the Jews in the Holy Land several centuries prior to the first Zionist congress in 1897. This explains why the initially socialist oriented secular project of social transformation has undergone sacralization, becoming a focal point of Evangelical Christian Zionists. These Evangelical contributions to Zionism and the Zionist state must be taken into account in analyses of the State of Israel, its position in the modern Middle East and the policy-making of those countries where such Evangelical circles wield significant influence.

Keywords: Zionism, Christian Zionism, Israel, Judaism, Evangelical

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Zionism is one of the more recent ideologies that set out to transform society. Zionists, and the State of Israel they created, represent a revolution in Jewish history, a revolution that began with the emancipation and the secularization of the Jews of Europe. Like all revolutions, Zionism was inspired by earlier ideas, and this paper explores Judaic and Christian sources of that inspiration. Secularization of Jewish life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries revolutionized Jewish identity, turning a once normative concept, Jewishness, into a purely descriptive one. Traditional Jews can be distinguished by what they do or should do; the new Jews by what they are. This split of identity, which has continued for almost two centuries, obliges us today to distinguish the adjective “Jewish” from “Judaic”. The term “Judaic” as used in this article refers to a normative meaning of Judaism, i.e. a religion with its spiritual and ritual aspects, making a claim on continuity rather than rupture. Conversely, the much broader term “Jewish” relates to Jews, their actions and ideas, regardless of their connection with Judaism. While some scholars maintain that Judaism became a religion in the Christian sense of the word only when Jews met modernity in Western Europe (Barnitzky 2011), it is beyond doubt that Judaic belief and practice had been fundamental to what it meant to be a Jew well before then.

Zionism has so drastically transformed Jewish life that the very word “Israel” has changed its meaning. According to Jacob Neusner, a rabbi, Zionist activist and one of the most prolific American academic interpreters of Judaism:

The word “Israel” today generally refers to the overseas political nation, the State of Israel. When people say, “I am going to Israel,” they mean a trip to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem…. But the word “Israel” in Scripture and in the canonical writings of the religion, Judaism, speaks of the holy community that God has called forth through Abraham and Sarah, to which God has given the Torah (“teaching”) at Mount Sinai…. The Psalmists and the Prophets, the sages of Judaism in all ages, the prayers that Judaism teaches, all use the word “Israel” to mean “the holy community.” Among most Judaisms, to be “Israel” means to model life in the image, after the likeness, of God, who is made manifest in the Torah. Today “Israel” in synagogue worship speaks of that holy community, but “Israel” in Jewish community affairs means “the State of Israel.” (Neusner 2002: 3–4)