By Guy Ben-Porat

THE REVOLUTION THAT NEVER WAS

In the absence of any genuine confrontation with the religious establishment, we have been left with malls open on Shabbat and gay pride parades – but without civil marriages or religious pluralism

Some years ago, Israel Segal, a writer and journalist who was brought up Orthodox and became secular, summed up what he described as a secular defeat: "The all-out war has indeed come to an end, in my view, with the defeat of the secular public ... We are living under an occupation government of the ultra-Orthodox minority. An occupation that is constantly tightening its grip."

Do the results of the recent general election augur a change? On the one hand, the Haredi parties were left out of the government and have become a punching bag for the new coalition; but at the same time, a new alliance between religious Zionism and self-styled secular Zionism is reconstituting the Jewish state.

It's a confusing situation. For couples who wish to marry, for example, the religious monopoly remains formally intact, and religiosity continues to constitute a central element of Israeli identity. But many couples find ways to institutionalize their marriage without the rabbinate, or choose to live in a non-institutionalized relationship. Similarly, the country's public space has become in some eyes blatantly secularized in recent decades: Shopping centers are open on the Sabbath, stores and restaurants sell non-kosher meat, weddings and burials are held without the rabbinate, and colorful and crowd-drawing gay pride parades take place in different cities.

Is Israel becoming secular? Is a secular option possible in the Israeli reality? Or is it the case that these processes, which can be described as secularization, are not actually changing the essence of the connection between religion and the state, but only allowing the Israeli bourgeoisie limited comfort zones?

Secularization hypothesis

In the secular narrative, secularity is an ideological victory of liberalism. It culminated in a pluralistic public space and a democratic political arrangement that guarantees various individual freedoms. In the middle of the 20th century, many sociologists were convinced that secularization was the almost inevitable result of the modernization processes which, as the sociologist Max Weber put it, entailed the "disenchantment of the world." The differentiation of modern industrialized societies entails the evolution of professionals and organizations – scientists, physicians, jurists – that perform tasks previously provided by churches. Stripped of their core social purposes, it was said, religious institutions will gradually waste away and be left with only the specific, and often not binding, responsibility of performing the formal rites of births, marriages and deaths, and the observance of special holidays.

In this state of affairs, in which religion is set to be dislodged from the public space, religious faith, participation in religious ceremonies and the observance of religious tenets become a matter of personal choice, and religious authority remains relevant only for those who choose to subordinate themselves to it. However, the forecasts – and, in large measures, the hopes – of the sociologists soon proved false. "The return of religion," as the process is sometimes called, demonstrated potently the firm status of religious faith, the ability of religions to adapt themselves to modern changes and, even more, the role that religion continues to play in modern life.

In many cases, religion declined to accept the marginal, privatized status it was assigned, and continued to play a political role. Toward the end of the last century, the American sociologist Peter Berger, a leading proponent of the secularization hypothesis, summed up the situation in the light of the forecasts which had not come to pass: "The world today, with some exceptions ... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever."

In developing states, the failure of secular revolutions and modernization "from above" restored religion to a central status. But even in the Western world, where modernization was supposed to ensure secularization, religion refused to disappear and recede into the private realm. In the United States, for example, the institutionalized separation between religion and state, enshrined in the Constitution, did not weaken religious identity. It persists as a basic element, not only in the life of many Americans, but also in the public discourse, which is laced with religious phraseology. Even in Europe, where the secularization processes ran deeper, religion retains a symbolic political status and religious faith has not disappeared.

Seeing that religion persisted in places whose modernity could not readily be doubted, and faced with an increasing number of conflicts that were classified as "religious" in character – many researchers declared the death of the secularization theory. Others, though, argued that the validity of the hypothesis had not necessarily been refuted. The critics, they claimed, had been mistaken in their definition of secularization and, it followed, also in measuring it.

The American sociologist Mark Chaves suggests that secularization be understood as a process implying not a demise of individual religiosity but the erosion of religious authority, without necessarily affecting the status of religious faith or religious identity. In other words, it does not necessarily follow that people who cease to obey religious authority thereby deny the existence of God or identify themselves as secular. The weakening of the established status of religion, concurrent with a growing emphasis on freedom and choice, does not necessarily give rise to clear and consistent secularity. Individuals and groups often forge a nexus of beliefs, behaviors and values, which is not subsumable under the traditional categories of religiosity or secularity. Equally important, secularization processes do not necessarily lead to secularity or to a liberal outlook, way of life or political agenda.

With the aid of these observations, it becomes possible to examine the ways in which secularization and religiosity (or

Orthodox men and boys on a sex-segregated beach in Bat Yam

Gil Cohen Magen

"religionizing") in Israel and elsewhere are not mutually exclusive and are able to coexist. Secularization, then, is not a linear process, nor is it inevitable. It changes from place to place and derives from the status of religion and from the role religion plays in public life and its encounters with the state and with the modern economy, the two institutions that seemingly pose a threat to its status.

State, economy, religion

The modern state, a secular entity, seemed to free itself from dependence on religion when it appropriated some of the powers and tasks that were previously held by religious institutions, restricted the status of religion in public life, and found new sources of legitimization, such as the national will. In practice, though, modern states and national movements frequently found themselves in need of religion and the religious establishment, or having to make political compromises with religious institutions, which continued to cling to powers both formal and informal.

To begin with, in many cases religion was part of the national identity, furnished the nation's symbols, demarcated its boundaries and acted as a mobilizing force in time of need. Second, the modern state appropriated religious functions but sometimes assumed a quasi-religious order.

Alexis de Tocqueville's insight about Christian morality, in his book "Democracy in America," remains valid today: "There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America ... It directs the customs of the community, and, by regulating domestic life, it regulates the state" (translation: Henry Reeve). The state's moral-religious order and its political order are mutually complementary, he explained, with religion imparting stability to politics and ensuring the moral order, thereby assuring obedience to the laws.

And third, the potency of religious identity and of religious institutions may oblige the state, albeit with a certain reluctance, to enter into compromises with those institutions and grant them powers. The division of powers between the state and the religious institutions was a result of struggles, negotiations, and compromises that set the rules of the game.

The secular state did not necessarily constitute a victory of liberal ideology or take the form of a struggle for freedom; in some cases it emerged from economic and political changes that undermined the old order. This overlooked aspect of secularization suggests that it differs from secularism – an ideology – and is significant both for identifying the forces behind secularization and the consequences of the process: namely, that secularization and liberalism were loosely interconnected. Indeed, secularity itself did not always live up to the liberal ethos it posited, and the new secular institutions bore an affinity with or similarity to religion – greater, in some cases, than their fomenters were willing to admit.

Nationalism and religious belief have much in common in their conception of purity, boundaries and order. National ideologies have demarcated anew the boundaries marked out by religion, have used religion to justify the boundaries that have been set, and in some cases have adopted a moral framework that is tantalizingly similar to religion. Thus, ►

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in secular France the recent decision to recognize same-sex marriage stirred not only the opposition of the Church, as was expected, but also outraged the national right and other groups whose aim is to preserve the sanctity of the family. The relations between the economy and religion suggest a complexity similar to that of religion-state relations. This is because role distribution in modern society has rendered the economy a quasi-independent entity, possessing a logic distinct from that of religion or politics.

In early capitalism, as Weber puts it in his classic description, the confrontation was deferred thanks to the "intimate relationship" between religion and the economy, which emerged when the imperatives of the Protestant ethic – hard work, thrift and investment – were yoked to the economic structure. "For if that God, whose hand the Puritan sees in all the occurrences of life, shows one of His elect a chance of profit, he must do it with a purpose. Hence, the faithful Christian must follow the call by taking advantage of the opportunity" (translation from the German: Talcott Parsons).

However, as Weber observed, this "moment" of holiness soon gave way to a capitalism that rests on new foundations of accumulation and consumption, and is divorced from its religious-moral obligation: "Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. Today the spirit of religious asceticism – whether finally, who knows? – has escaped from the cage."

The hedonism of late capitalism – consumption, accumulation of property and status – conflicted with the old values of thrift, industriousness and modesty. Once firmly ensconced, the capitalist economy not only was less in need of religious legitimization: It set out to subordinate religion to economic logic. Thus, the competition to religion posed by the state's secular institutions was ratcheted up by the consumer society, which defied the religious restrictions. This process eroded religious authority, but often without a clear intention or political agenda. Violation of the religious codes was a byproduct of participation in the experience of consumption.

However, as with the state, the tension and competition did not always entail divorce. The hedonism of late capitalism was accompanied by political conservatism and a conservative religious discourse. Margaret Thatcher, like many others on the economic right, did not discard religious legitimization when she quoted the 18th-century Methodist preacher John Wesley to explain the new moral-political order. "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can," Wesley intoned. "Those words remain valid today," Thatcher said, "and the British public remains faithful to them."

What can we learn from this about secularization and secularity? First, secularization processes are often the result of political and economic changes that undermined religious authority. Second, for various reasons, the political and economic institutions found themselves in need of religion and the religious establishment, or created substitutes for the religious moral order which closely resembled it. And third, the secularization processes were not necessarily connected with secularism or led to it as a world view or a liberal agenda.

Israel: secular ambivalence

As an intellectual exercise, let us try to imagine what would have happened if Israel had adopted the vision Theodor Herzl set forth in his tract "The Jewish State": "Shall we end by having a theocracy? No, indeed. Faith unites us, knowledge gives us freedom. We shall therefore prevent any theocratic tendencies from coming to the fore on the part of our priesthood. We shall keep our priests within the confines of their temples, in the same way as we shall keep our professional army within the confines of their barracks. Army and priesthood shall receive honors high as their valuable functions deserve. But they must not interfere in the administration of the state, which confers distinction upon them, else they will conjure up difficulties without and within. Every man will be as free and undisturbed in his faith or his disbelief as he is in his nationality" (translation from the German: Sylvie D'Avigdor). Separation between religion and state as proposed by Herzl would raise not only philosophical questions about the constituent elements of Jewish identity, but also political and practical ones about territorial claims, boundaries and the issue of national affiliation: "Who is a Jew?"

Those who define themselves as secular in Israel tend to attribute the power of the country's religious establishment and the Orthodox monopoly to religious political power that was translated into coalition agreements. This view tends to ignore the instrumental role played by religion in the process of nation- and state-building, as well as the secular ambivalence toward religion, from which it ostensibly tried to liberate itself. The Zionist challenge to established religion and the desire to break away from what it symbolized could not be fully realized as long as religion continued to play a part in territorial claims, national mobilization and demarcation of the state's boundaries.

Territorially, the claim to ownership of the Land of Israel incorporated, even if implicitly, the divine promise to the Jewish people, now returning to its land. Politically, a "statist" approach was required to mitigate the clash between religious and secular by means of compromises and partnership. And culturally, even in its most saliently secular manifestations, Israel was hard-pressed to free itself from its commitment to religion time and again, invoking symbols many of which were fraught with religious meaning.

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In a letter to Franz Rosenzweig, from 1926, Gershom Scholem, the future kabbala scholar, wrote, from Palestine, "The people certainly don't know what they are doing. They think they have secularized the Hebrew language, have done away with its apocalyptic point. But that, of course, is not true: the secularization of the language is no more than a manner of speaking, a ready-made expression ... Hebrew words, all that are not neologisms but have been taken from the treasure-house of our 'good old language,' are full to bursting with meaning. A generation that takes over the most fruitful part of our tradition – our language – cannot, though it may ardently wish to, live without tradition. When the day finally comes and the force shored up in the Hebrew language is unleashed, when the 'spoken,' the content of language, takes form once again, our people will find itself confronted anew with that sacred tradition, signifying the choice before them: either to submit or to perish. Because at the heart of such a language, in which we ceaselessly evoke God in a thousand ways, thus calling him back into the reality of our life, he cannot keep silent" (translation from the German: Ora Wiskind-Elper).

Religion, indeed, has come back – or never left. Religious authority outraged the non-religious public by curbing its activity and restricting its freedom of choice by exercising what was sometimes called "religious coercion." However, the consensus around the principle of the Jewish state; the conflict, which obliged national unity; and the constant invocation of religious symbols have all left little place to call religion into question. Under the thin cloak of the secular state, religion and the state-authorized religious institutions became the gatekeepers of the Jewish state. Consequently, for activist secular groups, a minority that attempted

Shopping on Shabbat. The competition to religion posed by secular institutions has been ratcheted up by consumer society.

Alex Levac

to challenge religious authority, only a narrow structure of opportunities for change was available.

'New secularism'

The structure of opportunities began to change in the 1980s, when social, economic and demographic developments began to produce cracks in the Orthodox monopoly. First, the Western consumer society that developed in Israel, with its hedonistic lifestyle and patterns of leisure, was less tolerant to religious restrictions. Second, the secular migration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, and the doubts about the Jewishness of many of the newcomers gave renewed momentum to the struggles of the secular public. And third, new concepts of Jewish identity challenged the hegemonic status of the Orthodox establishment.

The new secularization processes did not resolve the secular ambivalence concerning religion. The new secularization was broader than its predecessor, spoke in a different language and unfolded in different courses of action, circumventing direct confrontation. The discourse of rights and freedoms was swallowed up by a discourse of needs, desires and demands, and by economic language of supply and demand. Conscious political action gave way to strategies of circumvention that sought to avoid confrontation. And among many of those who had shared in the secularization process, soul-searching about questions of identity and ideology was marginal, since they addressed practical choices concerning everyday life in a consumer society.

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Despite the changes, the structure of opportunities remained limited because of the simultaneous religious revival, the continued ambivalence of many who term themselves secular, and the paralysis of the political system. The secularization processes did not take place in a vacuum and without response. Counter-processes of religious revival included secular Jews who "returned" to religion – a trend of unknown scope, which began in the 1970s and drew public attention when well-known figures from the secular world crossed the lines into the Haredi world and Haredi institutions set out to "help" Israelis find their religion.

In addition, the religious Zionist movement strove to move from a status of secondary partner to one of leadership by conjoining religion, politics and territory, imbuing the secularized Zionist symbols with renewed religious meaning. This group, leading the settlement project in the occupied territories, posited a new agenda that fused religious faith with nationalism, in the face of what was decried as the abandonment of values by secular Israel. Finally, there was the meteoric rise of Shas, which sought not only to protect the identity of Jews from the Islamic lands against forced secularization and revive their culture, but also to promote far-reaching change in the social agenda and in the Israeli collective identity.

The different processes of religionizing, or the connection between religion and nationality – secular Jews who became religiously observant, the emergence of Shas and the settlers' movement, Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) – shared a central thrust: opposition to secularization and a struggle for the place of religion in public life.

Of course, the terms "religious" and "secular" convey only a partial picture of a complex reality in which many groups define themselves as traditional, religious groups come into contact with secular life, and secular groups wish to define themselves through the prism of the Jewish tradition (while rejecting a commitment to *halakha*, traditional Jewish law). However, tension between secularizing and religionizing processes underlay a growing polarization seen in the rise of religious and secular political parties who prefer conflict over compromise, in public perceptions that the rift was becoming more acute and, most crucial, in the political deadlock. This state of affairs preserved the status of Orthodoxy, but at the same time allowed the non-religious groups to ignore the monopoly's existence.

Judicial ambiguity, legal loopholes, lax enforcement of existing laws and liberal rulings by the courts created new opportunities for political and economic entrepreneurs, and for change-seeking individuals and groups to free themselves from religious authority. The majority of the Jewish public in Israel still opts for a traditional wedding under rabbinic authority, but couples are also being married outside the rabbinate in various types of ceremonies, registering their marriage abroad or arranging it by legal means that bypass the rabbinic establishment. The structure of the family itself is changing, with lesbian, homosexual or single-parent families assuming normative status.

The same pattern is discernible in burial arrangements. Cemeteries in kibbutzim have become an economic business and offer an aesthetic-oriented approach, service and freedom of choice in regard to the ceremony and form of burial. And if in the past pork was sold furtively and under epithets such as "white steak," nowadays in most cities one easily finds stores and supermarket chains that sell nonkosher meat or restaurants that serve pork, with newspaper reviews guiding clients to them. Similarly, the debate over commerce on the Sabbath, despite the occasional outburst of discussions about "Shabbat inspectors," became irrelevant in a situation in which hundreds of thousands of Israelis flock to shopping centers across the country that are open on the day of rest.

Waiting for a revolution

Israel provides another test case for the collapse of secularization. Not only does religion continue to claim a place for itself in public life, but in the past three decades the religious-secular pairing has been supplanted by a multidimensional mosaic of identities, behaviors and approaches that challenge the familiar categories. Most of the Israeli Jews who shop on the Sabbath describe themselves as traditional, fast on Yom Kippur and do not eat pork. Most Israeli Jews support the civil-marriage option but would themselves prefer to be married in a traditional Orthodox ceremony. And an absolute majority of Israeli Jews, religious and secular alike, are committed to the country's definition as a Jewish state, even if they differ on what the definition entails.

The "new" secularization processes are broader and more popular than those that preceded them. However, they are matched by the established power of Orthodoxy, and with the Orthodox definition of religion, which remains the signifier of national boundaries. Thus, many Israelis continue to perceive Jewish Orthodoxy as a religious authority to which one turns in time of need, even if it is not very welcoming. In this state of affairs, Israelis who term themselves secular can link up with the national-religious public to protect the idea of a Jewish state and use slogans about an "equal burden," and they oddly describe a reform of the rabbinical services as a "revolution."

For others, the solutions offered by the market economy, together with the loopholes in the existing arrangements and the lax enforcement, make it possible to evade both a direct confrontation and commitment to a struggle – including a struggle in the name of a secular world view. To understand how short this change falls of a secular liberal ethos, one can simply recall the words of Israel's Declaration of Independence: "[the State of Israel] will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture."

Is secularization likely to close the gap between the promise of the declaration and contemporary reality? Secularization, propelled by individual interests and choices made available by economic changes, has not not transformed Israel into a secular state or made Israeli society liberal, particularly in terms of a commitment to equality, tolerance and freedom. Broad as they may be, these changes lack the depth needed for a revolution or even for a culture war.

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