

## ISRAEL AS JEWISH STATE

✓ Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya: *Religion and Politics in Israel*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. Pp. 148. \$17.50.)

The mixture of religion and politics is one of the most volatile in the human experience. As Americans learned again during the last national electoral campaign, few issues are as sure to arouse both passion and discord as those which involve religious commitments and convictions. What is true for the American polity is many times more so in those societies where the historic relationship between the political and religious spheres is more intimate. In the world today, religion—the force which most associate with a message of peace and reconciliation—is often the source of intractable political conflict.

Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya provide us with the opportunity to examine the interaction of religion and politics in a setting where the two are closely intermingled, often in tension with one another, but where, they argue, a reasonably stable relationship has been maintained: the State of Israel. Israel is by self-understanding a *Jewish* state, and by law, one in which religious institutions (including to some extent those of minority religions) are both supported financially by the state and accorded a role in the determination and implementation of public policy in several spheres. Yet Israel is also a Western-style parliamentary democracy, one in which religious conflict has by and large been contained within the boundaries of orderly political process.

In *Religion and Politics in Israel* Liebman and Don-Yehiya attempt to show how these two powerful spheres have contrived to coexist without serious damage to the integrity of either. They do so primarily by broadening somewhat the conventional frame of reference within which the political-religious interaction is usually conceived. Their focus is not only on how religious issues are dealt with in the political arena, but on the role which religion—specifically Judaism—plays in shaping the political culture of the society, in other words, what it means for Israel to be a Jewish state.

The interaction between religion and politics in Israel takes place, in fact, along several dimensions, each of which is dealt with in one or more chapters in Liebman and Don-Yehiya's book. The most fundamental interaction is in the definition of the state as a "Jewish" one. This definition is a central legacy left to Israel by the Zionist movement which created the state. But a majority of Zionists, and of Israelis today, are not "religious" in a traditional Jewish sense, that is, they do not observe fully the precepts of *halakha*, the Jewish legal tradition. Nevertheless, the authors argue, even these nonreligious Israeli Jews approve of the link between religion and state in Israel. Their Jewishness is primarily national-political in content, but its rootedness in Judaism as a religious-cultural system is acknowledged and accepted. Hence, virtually all Israelis—whether personally observant or not—view the tie between reli-

gion and state as legitimate (though in practice, the nonreligious often find the efforts of the religious to impose their standards through legislation objectionable).

The role of Judaism is, therefore, divisive in some respects, but integrative—and critically so—in others. This dual role is most evident in the Israeli civil religion (a topic with which Liebman and Don-Yehiya have dealt at length in another book). Their chapter on the civil religion in this book focuses on the strategies which have been developed at various stages in the evolution of the Israeli polity to redefine the religious tradition so as to make it a more acceptable basis of social integration for the nonreligious segment of the populace. From earlier attempts to fashion civil religious symbols in confrontation with or via careful selection from the traditional Judaic repertoire, Israeli political leaders have moved increasingly toward a nominal appropriation of the entire tradition, suitably reinterpreted to serve the needs of the polity. Thus, public life in Israel is carried out in a recognizably Judaic key.

It is against this backdrop of cultural interpenetration that specific issues of the role of religious institutions in the Israeli polity are presented. *Religion and Politics in Israel* includes several chapters treating different aspects of this question. An especially valuable one describes the “status quo” agreement—the Israeli “concordat” which defines the boundaries of religious influence on such matters as Sabbath and dietary law observance and in education, and the powers of officially sanctioned religious institutions in the area of personal status (marriages and divorce). This agreement has stood the test of time since the pre-state period, but has also been a constant source of tension as either secular or religious forces sought to push the boundaries it fixed in one direction or the other.

One of the most salient features of the interaction of religion and politics in Israel is the existence of several religious parties, all of which represent different segments of the Orthodox Jewish community. The attitude and mode of participation of religious Jews in the Israeli polity is by no means uniform. Liebman and Don-Yehiya review in one chapter the diverse attitudes toward Zionism and the ideology of Jewish statehood manifested by different Orthodox camps which have been identified with the several religious parties. In another, they examine the specific relationship between religious leaders and political leaders (both within and outside the religious parties), showing how nonseparation of church and state can produce the potential for attempted manipulation and intervention across the boundaries of the respective spheres. A third chapter focuses on what was until recent splits the preeminent religious party, the pro-Zionist National Religious party. The authors emphasize the difficulties of maintaining electoral unity even within the religious camp in the face of desecularization in the polity as a whole, ethnic differentiation, and the emergence of an ultranationalist religious faction.

The growing influence of the ultranationalists within the religious camp is part of the larger growth of religious extremism in Israel which embraces as well neotraditionalist groups which are indifferent or even hostile to Zionism per se. *Religion and Politics in Israel* concludes with a discussion of this phenomenon. The traditional leadership of the NRP helped to prevent religion from becoming a destabilizing force in the Is-

raeli polity because they were not extreme in their ideology or their demands on the system. The book thus ends with an implicit question: Should extremists of one stripe or another emerge as the predominant political factor among religious Israelis, will this portend a more serious *kulturkampf* and intensified conflict between religion and state?

*Religion and Politics in Israel* is a stimulating treatment of issues whose importance is not limited to the Jewish state. Liebman and Don-Yehiya, both political scientists at Bar-Ilan University, itself identified with Modern Orthodoxy, bring a blend of thorough familiarity with the Israeli scene and solid academic credentials to their examination. The result is an illuminating extended case study.

The weaknesses of the book arise primarily from the fact that it is a collection of essays originally published in other places, and therefore not a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the topic. Readers with some background—both in the character of Israeli politics in general and in the specifics of the religious issues which are part of that politics—will have a significant advantage over the uninitiated. In addition, though Liebman and Don-Yehiya frame some conceptual issues in their introduction (and occasionally in the body of the book), the work as a whole is long on narrative and short on theory. There is, as well, little effort made to set the material discussed in a comparative perspective, and this, as both authors would surely acknowledge, is a lacuna that must eventually be filled if the data they present is to have maximal significance for our understanding of the theme of religious-political interaction in general.

Despite these shortcomings, *Religion and Politics in Israel* is eminently worth reading. For those accustomed to the idea that separation of church and state provides the only healthy model for the relationship of religion and politics in the modern world, the example of Israel offers an occasion for second thoughts. Liebman and Don-Yehiya show us many reasons for being wary of too intimate an entanglement, but they also demonstrate that a democratic state can accord religion a central role in the political process without undermining national unity or stability.

—JONATHAN S. WOOCHEER

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### THE HIGH CLASS OF PRESIDENTS

Edward Pressen: *The Log Cabin Myth: The Social Backgrounds of the Presidents*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. Pp. xii + 196. \$16.95.)

This is a fun book. That's right, fun. Edward Pressen, a historian, has filled a lacuna in American political history by canvassing the plentiful available sources to produce a composite portrait of the backgrounds of the thirty-nine presidents. He finds, to his evident surprise, that the vast majority of presidents did not rise from poverty, or even from the middle class. Rather, they have emerged from the upper echelons of American society and have benefited, by and large, from substantial advantages in education, wealth, and opportunity.

Pressen gathers a good deal of evidence to support his claims, and