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Reform Judaism: Undone by Revival

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In the 1950s, only some forty years ago, the voice of rejoicing and salvation could be heard in the tents of the righteous. Religion in America was celebrating a great comeback. Billboards invited us to attend the church of our choice. "The family that prays together," we were informed, "stays together." A President of the United States called upon the nation to "have faith in faith." It belonged to the *bon ton* of good citizenship, it was indeed a prerequisite for escaping the suspicion that one harbored Communist sympathies, to be affiliated with one of the major religious denominations of America. In those days, the late Will Herberg published his noteworthy study in the sociology of religion, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew.* Herberg argued that, in order to be recognized as a good American, one had to belong to the American Religion, for that was the way in which Americans had learned to identify themselves. And that common American Religion was available in three equally recognized editions: a Protestant one, a Catholic one, and a Jewish one.

Judaism was, of course, part of the religious scene in those days; and it, too, reaped the benefits of the American "revival of faith." The move to the suburbs, in which Jews were heavily involved, led to the building of many new synagogues and temples. Jews who, while living in the inner city of New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, might never have dreamed of belonging to any Jewish religious congregation, now experienced the kind of peer pressure that made them join in the building of suburban synagogues and temples. Some of them did not even need any peer pressure. However tenuous or nonexistent their own religious convictions might have been in the city, they did want their children to know something about their ancestral heritage. The only way this could be done in the suburbs was by joining a temple or synagogue, and by enrolling one's children in the Sunday and/or Hebrew School.

Obviously, the type of person we have in mind–the Labor Zionist or other Jewish secularist from way back–had a preference for the non–Orthodox type of synagogue or temple; and all kinds of factors entered into the decision–making about whether it was going to be a Conservative or a Reform one–although strictly *religious* considerations may not necessarily always have been in the forefront. The Reconstructionists were somewhat slow in getting themselves "established" in the suburbs; and, where they did, it was liable to be as informal "fellowships," meeting at first in private homes. Yet once they did get started, they exerted a natural influence on the Jewish secularists who sought some kind of Jewish affiliation. Most of the new affiliations, however, seem to have been with either Reform or Conservative suburban congregations.

And so, as noted above, the voice of rejoicing and salvation was heard in the tents of the righteous. The nonreligious Jew, whose parents might have attended the infamous "Yom Kippur Balls," which were held at the time when religious Jews attended *Kol Nidre* services on Atonement Eve; the ex–Orthodox Jew, who had become a Marxist while attending rabbinic school; the Reform Jew so "classical" that all that was left of Jewish observance was his annual attendance at the Memorial Service on the Day of Atonement (and that only out of filial piety); and the secular Zionist, who had always regarded the Jewish religion as nothing but a mechanism "to keep the Jewish nation alive in Exile," but as no longer needed now that the State of Israel had been created–they all swelled the ranks of Jewish congregations that had been founded with the avowed purpose of maintaining the Jewish *religion*. Obviously, the pious saw in this a great movement of "return" to the ancestral faith, and a rejection of the "substitute religions" that had, until then, attracted an ever–increasing number of Jews away from the Jewish religious *Weltanschauung*.

Whatever happened to the children of those secularist Jews, after their parents had joined religious congregations, where they, the children, attended Sunday School and/or Hebrew School? Well, some of those who were children then are now leading members of the congregations their parents had joined. Some are in positions of leadership in the national unions made up of various congregations. Some, and not an insignificant number of them, have even made it into the rabbinate. Apparently not a bad record–or is it?

The fact of the matter is that the secularist Jews who flocked to the synagogues and temples in the 1950s, far from seeking refuge there, as the old phrase has it, "under the wings of the *Shekhinah*," have simply taken over those religious bodies, and have made them over in their own image–helping by their very presence those already within the religious "establishment" who had all along aspired to a more secularist understanding of Judaism. As an ancient Roman once said in a somewhat different context: "The conquered have given the laws to the conquerors." Religious Jews in the fifties rejoiced too soon at the large influx of secularist Jews into the temples and synagogues. It is the temples and synagogues, not the secularists, that have been "captured."

The degrees of takeover vary from one wing of American Judaism to another. It is probably safe to assume that the least–affected synagogues are those of the Orthodox persuasion, since, in the fifties, the least number of Jewish secularists would have affiliated with Orthodox synagogues. By the same token, Reform Judaism, arguably the main recipient of the secularist influx, is today in the forefront of secularism in America, and is, in its official pronouncements, very often indistinguishable from the ACLU and the political left. It even maintains a leftist political lobby in Washington, D.C., camouflaging it under the name of "*Religious* Action Center." Conservative Judaism, by and large, still manages to hold the religious line; but even here voices are occasionally being heard in support of radical leftism in politics. Even here, one can come across an occasional argument in favor of homosexual clergy, or a substitution of sociology for theology in the exposition of Judaism. As for Reconstructionist Judaism, it came into existence in the 1930s, based on a denial of the existence of a personal and supernatural God and the denial of the election of Israel as God's covenant people. No wonder, then, that it has, of late, been vying with Reform Judaism in the championship of homosexuality and lesbianism in the clergy, in "innovative" and "non–sexist" liturgy, in adopting a definition of Jewish personal status that differs radically from the definition accepted by the rest of the world's religious Jews, and in identifying the religion of the Hebrew prophets with the latest demands of leftist politicians. But it is a *friendly* competition between Reform Judaism and Reconstructionist Judaism–so friendly, in fact, that Reconstructionist Judaism has recently been admitted to membership in the World Union for Progressive Judaism. That organization, founded in the 1920s as an umbrella organization for the world's liberal and Reform Jews, has, for the last few decades, been functioning as the "State Department" of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, i.e., the headquarters of *American* Reform Judaism.

There is also in existence an unabashedly atheistic form of "Judaism," sailing under the flag of "Humanistic Judaism." Efforts are currently being made by some highly placed Reform Jewish leaders to win membership in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations for the Cincinnati branch of that "Humanistic Judaism"–a body that came into existence when some members of Cincinnati's various Reform temples objected to the fact that *God* was worshipped in those temples.

When in the last century Felix Adler, the founder of the Society for Ethical Culture and an erstwhile candidate for the Reform rabbinate, discovered that his nontheistic views did not correspond to those of Reform Judaism–which, in those days, though weak on traditional observances, was very strong on Ethical Monotheism–he had the honesty and the decency to decline the position of rabbi at Manhattan's prestigious Temple Emanuel when it was offered to him. It may serve as an indication of the distance that Reform Judaism has traversed in the last one hundred years that today people of Felix Adler's way of thinking are not only urged to stay within (or to rejoin) the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, but they are even encouraged to enter the Reform seminary for the training of rabbis, where they will be duly ordained.

The fact of the matter is that Reform Judaism in America has, somewhere along the line, lost its religious moorings. (The condition of Reform Judaism in other parts of the world is not necessarily identical with that obtaining in the United States. But the financial dependence of Reform congregations elsewhere upon the largesse of American Reform Judaism makes their disavowal of American Reform policies and decisions somewhat muted.) Because American Reform Judaism no longer finds it necessary to justify itself before God and the Jewish religious tradition, its abject submissions–both lay and rabbinical–to any and all modern fads are boringly predictable. Tell me what is going to be on the agenda of the Biennial of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations or of a convention of Reform Judaism's Central Conference of American Rabbis, and I will tell you–even three years in advance–what the outcome of the voting is going to be.

It was not always so. There was a time within living memory when the Union of American Hebrew Congregations actually issued a pamphlet glorying in the influence that Jewish teachings purportedly exerted upon the founding of the American Republic. Today the leaders of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations are overjoyed at the fact that copies of the Ten Commandments have been torn off the walls of Kentucky public schools by court order. Those leaders (and innumerable paid officials) can also be counted on to make common cause with the ACLU and assorted atheists and secularists in fighting for the removal of the last vestiges of the presence of religion in American public life.

Their right to do so should, of course, not be curtailed. What, after all, is a free society for? But the time may well have come for the law about truth in advertising to be invoked. I recall one Sabbath some years back when I attended a Reform Jewish worship service. What the rabbi said in his sermon I have long since forgotten. But I shall probably always remember the big display in the temple's foyer, urging me to write to my Senator with the plea that he block the appointment of Judge Bork to the United States Supreme Court. Postcards for that purpose were supplied on the spot. So *this* is what Reform Judaism means by "the separation of Church and State," a cause that is so very much closer to its heart than some of the provisions in the eighteenth chapter of the Book of Leviticus.

Yet the incongruity lies in the nomenclature alone. The recent doings of American Reform Judaism cause surprise only if one assumes that American Reform Judaism is a *religious* denomination. Those doings do not cause any surprise at all the moment one realizes that, whatever may have been the goal that Reform Judaism set for itself in the nineteenth century, late–twentieth–century American Reform Judaism–in spite of some half–hearted attempts to retrieve a few traditional ceremonies that had been jettisoned in an earlier stage of Reform Judaism's development–is first and foremost a "Jewish" form of institutionalized secularism, the successor, as it were, of those Jewish groups of an earlier time that specialized in rejecting and fighting religion, not least the one they had inherited from their own ancestors. Among the substitute religions that those earlier groups put in the place of Judaism, a radical form of socialism figured rather prominently. And so it does in the activities of Reform Judaism's so–called "Religious" Action Center in our nation's capital.

For a while, in the fifties or later, religionists were able to gloat because of all those secularists who, in their thousands, had joined temples and synagogues. But it was, after all, only a Pyrrhic victory for the pious. The conquered have since succeeded in laying down the law to the conquerors.

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