

Guy Ben-Porat, *Between State and Synagogue. The Secularization of Contemporary Israel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 2013.

by *Marcella Simoni*

This volume represents an important contribution to the literature on the relationship between Church and State, focusing on the State of Israel, hence the reference to Synagogue in the title. The volume is divided in six chapters; the first two provide a theoretical and a historical introduction, while the following four address one main theme each: the question of civil marriage (ch. 3) and of civil burial (ch. 4), that of raising, producing, selling and serving pork in Israel (ch. 5) and the question of shopping (and more in general of conducting business) on Israel's official day of rest, the *Shabbat* (ch. 6). The relevance of these subjects is only apparently different, civil marriage and burial seemingly carrying more weight than eating pork or shopping on *Shabbat*. However, this choice of subjects is convincing for at least three reasons: first, it helps to present a balanced argument within a coherent analysis of the process of secularization which has unfolded in Israel since the 1990s (p. 213). The A. looks at various factors: individuals' belief and behaviour, the private initiative of economic entrepreneurs responding to individual and socio-economic needs not otherwise covered by the State, the campaigns of some organizations and movements to have acknowledged the legitimacy of a secular perspective on certain individual rights, the role of the High Court of Justice in such a process. Second, each of the four themes mentioned above is investigated with equal thoroughness and rigour; finally, an analysis conducted on four such different subjects also shows how pervasive, and ultimately limiting, can religious monopoly be for who would rather have the possibility to choose between a religious or a secular perspective in the State of Israel, among them secular individuals and many migrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU). And while the book is very balanced between apparently heavier and lighter subjects, one cannot but wonder why the A. did not extend his analysis to include other topics as well: education seems an important crossroads where lay and religious authorities, institutions and legislation meet, clash and often compromise; so is medical care and research (in particular in the field of reproductive health, euthanasia, organ donation), as well as two other topics which are only marginally touched upon respectively in chapter 3 and 4; these are same sex families and step children adoption on the one hand, and military service (and who can be exempted) on the other.

Each of the four subjects investigated here is first framed from a theoretical point of view, placed in a brief comparative perspective with other national cases, religious traditions and national legislations, and is then scrutinized for the Israeli situation. Some historical background is given for each of them, but *Between State and Synagogue* can be viewed as an example of history of the present. This emerges from at least two points; in the first place, from the sources used by the A. These consists of media reports and

internet data, studies conducted by various organizations which have campaigned to introduce a more secular agenda in Israeli society and politics, an analysis of some of their initiatives, judicial decisions taken on one or the other issue discussed in the various chapters, surveys provided by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, as well as about forty in depth interviews with some of the actors involved in the process of secularization that the country apparently has been undergoing since the 1990s. The A. terms them secular entrepreneurs – for instance managers of a shop/shopping centre, representatives of reformed or conservative temples and movements, managers of secular cemeteries or travel agents that organize civil weddings abroad, notably Cyprus - who share some (mainly) economic or (less so) ideological interest in the country's secularization. One can speak of history of the present also because of the main chronological turning point that recurs throughout the study, i.e. the 1990s, when about one million persons from the FSU immigrated to Israel. They were recognized as Jews collectively for immigration purposes according to the Law of Return, but not individually for reasons of uncertain individual descent, as many of them did not match the religious legal criteria (*halakhah*) followed by Orthodox religious institutions and hence, by the State. This left many of them in an impossible limbo where – in a context where personal status law continues to be monopolised by Orthodox religious authorities - their individual rights could not be guaranteed. This was for example the case Lev Pesachov discussed in chapter 4 (p. 109). One should not forget that the same decade saw the incorporation of Israel into a process of economic globalization. The combination of these factors opened up new demands for more secular spaces and helped readdress and re-discuss the relationship between the State, society, religious parties and institutions and individuals in various ways.

There are several questions that this book addresses: in the first place, what is the institutional setting for the relationship between Church and State that was laid in 1948 (*status quo*), an agreement that indeed left in the hands of Orthodox religious institutions issues of personal status law (marriage and divorce), of life, death and burial, that imposed the *Sabbath* (in its religious definition) as Israel's day of rest and that prohibited the breeding, sale and consumption of pork. Secondly, what have been the social and political consequences of this state of affairs since the early 1950s, and how did this setting stand the trial of the 1990s. Who have been the political or individual secular entrepreneurs that operated – and often struggled - to change such a setting; which interests and rationales guided them, if they responded to an ideological commitment, to an economic interest or if they acted to respond to the emergence of a social question. Some of these questions are outlined in the preface (p. xvii) but, in a broader perspective, one of the main questions that the book tries to answer is whether, and to what extent, can we call Israel (as a State and as a society) secular or religious, or if any of the nuances available between these two terms – from ultra-orthodox to traditional – describe the situation more accurately. Put it differently - and to go back to a long past controversy – this book contributes to the discussion whether Israel is a Jewish state, i.e.

a state where religion is institutionalized, and where it regulates the intimate desires and practices of its citizens, what they can or cannot eat, and when they can spend their earnings, and how such a situation reflects on the concepts of democracy as a system of value and as a practice. Or if, on the contrary, Israel is a state of Jews (*Der Judenstaat?*), where varying degrees of religious identity are expressed and accordingly regulated according to individual sensitivity and wishes (p. 6).

After analysing in depth the four themes mentioned above and the changes they underwent from the 1990s onwards, the answer seems pretty straightforward: the State is ultimately considered “lagging behind in secularization” (p. 224), while the picture that emerges from society is more complex, being it almost impossible to measure religious identity “on a single-dimensional axis of religious belief” (p. 48). In his conclusions, Ben-Porat resumes Sammy Smooha’s (1997) definition of Israel as an “ethnic democracy”, i.e. “a nonliberal democracy with a stratified citizenship structure that excludes and marginalizes groups according to ethnicity and gender” (p. 224).

Central to the argument of this volume is the distinction between secularization – defined here as a process and as the decline of religious authority - and secularism – seen as an ideology, a “comprehensive worldview associated with liberal ideology of equality and freedom” (p. xii). This study is primarily concerned with the former and with the interesting and manifold processes connected to such a decline in the political, social and economic spheres; indeed the A. refers to a deconstruction, or as he terms it, “disaggregation” of the concept of secularization as one that “opens up the possibility of a more nuanced and empirical study of both the declining role of religion in society vis-à-vis other systems (political and economic) and the role of religion in individual lives” (p. 6). After reading the book, one would hope that such a disaggregation would eventually also open up the possibility of a more nuanced lifestyle where citizens are guaranteed in their rights and intimate wishes before an equal law.

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