



## Overcoming the “Religion and Politics” Discourse

### A New Interpretation of the Israeli Case

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#### Abstract

Arguing against the prevalence of the religion and politics discourse, this essay aims to outline a critical interpretation of the unresolved and problematical nature of the State of Israel’s approach to Jewish traditions. Such an interpretation, I argue, enables us to both avoid the misconceptions and misinterpretations encouraged by the use of the allegedly transhistorical and transcultural category of “religion” for the study of Jewish politics, and to better understand the foundational political issues that are commonly studied under the title “religion and politics” in Israel. I thus suggest a discussion of several notions that become further clarified by refocusing the framework of discussion and analysis on matters of tradition. These touch upon three central issues: the role of Jewish traditions in (a) the shaping of the Zionist project, (b) the shaping of the Israeli public sphere, and (c) the formation and development of Jewish identities in Israel.

#### Introduction

Prevalent and supposedly self-evident as the discourse on religion and politics in Israel is, I would nevertheless argue in this essay that overcoming this discourse is essential for understanding some of the most fundamental issues in Israeli politics. Having been implanted into the Jewish-Israeli, Zionist context by way of adopting and translating some of the most basic dominant Western premises regarding theology and politics, this discourse not only forces a foreign (Christianity-based) framework on the Zionist/Jewish-Israeli case, but more critically it also carries over to the Israeli case some of the most fundamental misunderstandings and misinterpretations characterizing this discourse in its original context.

Given this discourse’s dominance, most commentators tend to assume, whether implicitly or explicitly, that Jewish Religion and Israeli Politics are two clearly separated, essentially distinguishable realms that, for some historical and political reasons, tend to be entangled and confused. They view Israeli society and politics as essentially dictated by the essential tension between religion and politics and by the socio-cultural cleavage between “secular” and “religious” Jews in Israel, essentially recognizing the former as committed to liberal-democratic (secular) values and the latter as an anti-democratic, theocracy-craving conservative minority.

Needless to say, this premise regarding an essential, categorical distinction between religion and politics reflects a broader worldview that dominates corresponding discussions on similar issues outside of Israel (often constructed as matters of church and state). Moreover, as I shall discuss shortly, the assumed dichotomy between “religion” and “politics” is a modern Protestant notion, with only limited validity (in the best of cases) in Jewish history and thought. In other words, even before we challenge the dichotomy itself, it is rather obvious that it is essentially foreign to Jewish traditions (Batnitzky; cf. Walzer, Lorberbaum, Zohar, and Lorberbaum; Walzer, Lorberbaum, Zohar, and Ackerman). It is doubly regrettable then that the discourse built around this dichotomy is largely mistaken and misleading.

To understand why this is so, we have to first keep in mind – or rather to make explicit – what this discourse assumes to be a given. I am referring here to the taken for granted conceptual and epistemological basis of our analysis of politics. This discourse first assumes religion to be a transhistorical and transcultural, rather abstract concept – indeed, one that has been stubbornly avoiding agreed-upon definitions. (This latter fact should not deter us from further using the concept “religion,” as we supposedly all know what it means.) Second, this discourse takes religion to be essentially, fundamentally independent from the almost-just-as-abstract (and surely also transhistorical and transcultural) notion of “politics.” Indeed, the discourse goes further to advocate the separation between these two realms as a precondition for the viability of modern democracies. Doing so, this discourse assumes as a given the secular(ist) epistemology that views the distinction between religion and non-religion (i.e., the secular) as the fundamental basis of (at least) modernity. (Most works that belong to what is usually termed today “post-secularism” tend to make similar assessments of this discourse. For a few penetrating examples, see Asad 2003; Bhargava; Casanova; Connolly; Jakobsen and Pellegrini; Taylor.)

Now, as William Cavanaugh (2009) has convincingly shown, this very common use of “religion” is fundamentally wrong: it ignores the specific history of the term, its cultural (or rather theological) origins and developments, and, most importantly, the configurations of power that drive these developments, especially that of the currently common use of the term. He sums up the conclusions of his penetrating critical interpretation:

The first conclusion is that there is no transhistorical or transcultural concept of religion. Religion has a history, and what counts as religion and what does not in any given context depends on different configurations of power and authority. The second conclusion is that the attempt to say that there is a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is separable from

secular phenomena is itself part of a particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West. In this context, religion is constructed as transhistorical, transcultural, essentially interior, and essentially distinct from public, secular rationality (2009: 59).

It is the modern political – that which is constructed as essentially secular, the not-religion – that gives birth to our common, just-as-modern use of “religion.” In other words, the order of the modern, sovereign, “secular” nation-state, with its insistence on a monopoly over its subjects’ lethal loyalty, is what drives the invention of “religion”; “To construe Christianity as a religion, therefore, helps to separate loyalty to God from one’s public loyalty to the nation-state” (Cavanaugh 2009: 59). Another way of putting this is to say that the discourse on church (or synagogue) and state camouflages the many ways in which the latter is playing a major role in the very construction of the former for its own needs.

Carried over to the Zionist and Israeli case, the “religion and politics” framework perpetuates the misconception that Zionism has been an essentially secular project. The argument here uses the very terms by which this epistemology constructs the Western, liberal democracy as essentially secular. It also propagates a narrative that assumes Israel to be a secular, liberal, and democratic nation-state, which for various reasons is forced or coerced to pass and enforce laws that impose Jewish “religion” on the (otherwise “secular”) public sphere and on the private lives of Israeli citizens. This is blamed primarily on the representational and coalitional structure of the Israeli political system, which allegedly endows the “religious” political parties with the ability to extort compromises and concessions from the “secular” majority.

This, after all, is the idea encapsulated in one of the basic notions of Israeli politics, namely the (in)famous “status quo” (or, in a longer form: “the secular-religious status quo”) – a title commonly used to denote or describe the otherwise strange mixture of the two supposedly distinct realms of religion and politics, or even more confusingly, of the two mutually exclusive categories of “the religious” and “the secular” in Israel. The “status quo” is largely understood to be a “conflict-neutralizing, consociational (sic.) arrangement” regarding “the proper place of Judaism in the Jewish state” (Cohen and Susser: 18). It is usually presented as a “compromise” (Barak-Erez: 2496) or an “accommodation” (Don-Yehiya: 1) between two sides: the “secular camp” (which is supposedly committed to the aim of establishing a secular, liberal, and democratic regime, in which religion is excluded from public matters), and the “religious camp” (which is allegedly committed to the enforcement and coercion of Jewish Law onto the state and its citizens).

This bipolarity generates severe misunderstandings, and prevents us from carefully assessing the unresolved nature of the relationship between Zionism (followed by the nation-state it has established) and what it, Zionism, has viewed (following the cue of contemporaneous Jewish-European thought) as “Jewish religion,” distinguishable from “Jewish nationality.” This distinction, it should be noted at the outset, is an idea borne out of the coercion of Jewish traditions into the splint of the essentially European Christian historically situated categories of “religion” and “nationalism.” As such, this discussion hides several important foundational facts regarding the meaning of Jewish and Israeli identity, and

encourages a misrepresentation of the diversity of Jewish identities in Israel (to note but two of its regrettable consequences).

### A “Traditionist” Alternative

I would argue that a fruitful way to transcend this discourse’s narrow horizon and to engage in an examination – a construction, even – of its alternatives, is to identify the matters at hand *not* as an issue of religion and politics in Israel, but rather as a (quintessentially political) issue of our relations with our traditions (Yadgar 2013). In other words, I would propose that we engage in a critical reading of the unresolved, problematical, often manipulative nature of the State of Israel’s approach to the numerous histories of Jewish communities, histories that are manifested in the Jewish traditions that preceded the Zionist project and its culmination in the State of Israel.

Thus we come to grips with the central issue to be addressed: How does the nation-state’s “theopolitics” (Cavanaugh 1998, 2003) – constituted, as it is (symbolically, at least), on an “invented” (Hobsbawm and Ranger; Liebman and Don-Yehiya; Zerubavel) national tradition – approach Jewish traditions that preceded it and continue to live alongside it? (I offer a more detailed consideration of these issues [in Hebrew] in Yadgar 2012.)

The “problem” with those Jewish traditions is that they do not fit easily, if ever, into commonly used categorical frameworks, which originate in modern Western discourse such as “nation,” “ethnicity,” “race,” and, maybe most importantly, “religion.” Let us ignore for a moment, even if only for the sake of argument, the tendency to view these categories, borne as they are from a specific European-Christian history (W. C. Smith; J. Z. Smith; Asad 1993; Masuzawa; Dubuisson; Cavanaugh 2011), as if they were a universal language of human order, which is necessarily also applicable to the histories of Jewish communities. What is critical to note is that in many, meaningful senses “Judaism” is both and at the same time each and every one of these terms or categories, and neither of them (cf. Batnitzky: 1-3; Satlow). This is so because Jewish traditions are comprehensive ways of life that touch upon various dimensions of human experience, which are sometimes labeled under one of the abovementioned categories, while at other times are labeled under another.

Bearing this in mind, I would like to offer below a short discussion of several notions that become further clarified by refocusing the framework of discussion and analysis on matters of tradition. These touch upon three central issues: the role of Jewish traditions in (a) the shaping of the Zionist project, (b) the shaping of the Israeli public sphere, and (c) the formation and development of Jewish identities in Israel.

### Zionism and Jewish Traditions

One of the more fruitful ways to understand Zionism is *not* to identify it as an attempt at secularizing Judaism (or “Jewish tradition”) through the invention of a national tradition; predominant as such a description is (e.g., Avineri; Shimoni: 269-332), it nevertheless suffers from some acute deficiencies (cf. Salmon), not least of which is its lack of clarity as to the very meaning of “secularization.” Instead, Zionism is to a large extent a counter-reaction to another act of invention, which preceded Zionism: the making of Judaism into a “religion” (or, in other words, the invention of “Jewish religion”). I am referring here to the modern ideological and practical move that originated in Europe, mostly in Germany, from the

eighteenth century onwards, which sought to reinterpret Jewish traditions so as to render them applicable to the allegedly universal (and essentially European Protestant), apolitical category of “religion,” in itself a contemporaneous invention (Batnitzky offers a compelling narrative of this “invention” and its consequences). Of course, this perspective does not capture Zionist ideology in its whole. For one thing, it downplays (only for the sake of focus) other forceful drivers of Zionism, such as a European-Jewish rebellion against what was viewed as Jewish passivism and an attempt at liberation from gentile political authority. My argument here is focused on mainstream Zionist ideology, which tended to view itself as “secular,” postponing my discussion on the minor-yet-influential stream of Religious Zionism (see my discussion below).

Viewed from this perspective, it is rather clear that Zionism emerged as a forceful argument against the idea that Judaism is in essence a “religion,” that is a system of belief, a “faith” that is mostly a personal, apolitical matter of “spirituality.” The idea that Judaism is a religion – exactly that which is labeled under this title and nothing beyond it – is usually accredited to Moses Mendelssohn. Its further development and articulation (mostly by other German Jewish philosophers) brought about the formation of Reform Judaism, encouraged the shaping of the historical positivist position (better known today as Conservative Judaism), and, ultimately, facilitated the shaping of Jewish modern orthodoxy and ultra-orthodoxy as counter reactions to the Reform interpretation of the implications of this idea.

One of the arguments implied by the idea that Judaism is a religion is that Judaism is essentially apolitical; it is surely not a nationality, at least in the prevalent contemporaneous European nation-state oriented sense of this term. By making Judaism a “religion,” modern European Jews had allegedly solved the potential tension in their identification as members of an alien, foreign nation living among host nationalities. It enabled Jews to become “German (or French, or otherwise) nationals of the Mosaic faith”: loyal citizens and servants of the nation-state who differ from the majority only in the limited realm of religious belief, which in any way lacks political implications.

Zionism sought to negate this argument. The driving ideological force of this historical project had revolved, fundamentally, around a competing argument, which also used the contemporaneous European political discourse: the Zionist idea on its various formulations states that Judaism (or – keeping with the secular/religion distinction, which tends to denote Judaism as equal to “Jewish Religion” – let us say, *Jewishness*) is a *nationality*, not just a religion. Jewish religion has indeed been *part* of the history of the Jewish nation, but Jewish nationality is that which defines the people. As such, it must be expressed and realized in the political framework of a nation-state, in which the true meaning of Judaism as a nationality will be reincarnated (Avineri; Laqueur; Shimon).

This nationalism – which many Zionist thinkers preferred to label “Hebrew,” not “Jewish” – was thusly presented as a broader frame of meaning, which incorporates in it “Jewish religion” but is surely not dictated by this religion, nor is it identical to it. This idea also stands at the core of the State of Israel, which is commonly identified as the (supposedly secular) state of the Jewish nation, or even as a “Jewish state” *per se*.

As in other cases of emerging nationalist movements (Hobsbawm and Ranger), the Zionist project has also involved a wide-ranging endeavor of “inventing” a national tradition;

Zionism was required to instill the notion of a national Jewish identity with a positive meaning, and Zionist thinkers were required to rewrite “Jewish history,” to reinterpret Jewish meaning and subjects, so as to render these consistent with the national meta-narrative, and to generate a political conflation between territory and identity, whether ethnic, national, linguistic, etc. (Liebman and Don-Yehiya; Luz; Zerubavel).

Needless to say, Zionism has found the building blocks for this rewriting in the histories of Jews, that is, in Jewish traditions. But it had arrived at this move as it had been already deeply immersed in the context of the “secularization” of Judaism (a move that culminated in the movement of Jewish Enlightenment, *Haskala*). That is to say, this project of a national rewriting of traditions was, from the outset, based upon the false distinction between Jewish “religion” and other, “essentially secular” dimensions (political, national, cultural, linguistic, and so on) of Judaism. Moreover, prevalent streams in Zionist ideology tended to view this same “religion” as oppressing the national vitality, and as the root cause for what they viewed as the decline of the Jewish people.

How, then, has Zionism constructed its position vis-à-vis Jewish traditions that had preceded it (and were, so the mainstream argument has claimed, besmirched by the stain of “religiosity”)? Several Zionist leaders and thinkers chose largely to ignore this question, focusing instead on the notion of Jewish political power by way of imagining the “Jews’ State” as a sort of a European nation-state – indeed, a German speaking state, at that, in the case of Theodor Herzl – that is ruled by Europeans of Jewish decent. Others, who were fiercely critical of this neglect, viewed the Zionist project as primarily obligated to “secularize” Judaism, that is to reinterpret Jewish traditions so as to make them consistent with a rationalist, modernist, utilitarian worldview, which will be the basis of the (secular) nation-state of the Jews (Shimoni: 269-303).

A similar notion of reinterpretation lied at the root of the self-image of those Socialist-Zionist ideologues who arrived in Palestine with the declared aim of rewriting the meaning of their Jewish (or Hebrew) identity. These founders, most of whom had received a traditional Jewish education and practically all of whom were driven by a rebellion against the authority of the way-of-life into which they were born, had an intimate, unmediated familiarity with certain Jewish traditions (mostly East-European ones), and they sought to reinterpret parts of these traditions. They did so from a confrontational, aggressive position, never hesitating to rewrite traditional rituals and instill them with what they viewed as updated content (Lilker; Don-Yehiya and Liebman).

It should be noted that this aggressive confrontation with tradition nevertheless manifests a certain kind of conversation with it, a fierce dialogue based upon relative fluency in matters of this tradition. A rebellion against authority is also an acknowledgment of it, and it is surely based upon a familiarity with it. But once the ideological enthusiasm had ebbed, and the unmediated familiarity with tradition was lost, the sons and daughters of these ideological pioneers were left with a sour residue of resentment against Jewish tradition and “religion,” and they were largely ignorant of the content of these objects of their derision. They have, of course, remained identified as Jewish. But the positive meaning of this identity, beyond the fact that they have been committed to the establishment of a Jewish

nation-state, became increasingly vague. The dialogue between them and their Jewish tradition became gradually silent (cf. Kurzweil; Yadgar 2012: 66-86).

### The State of Israel and the “Status Quo”

The establishment of the State of Israel did not resolve this dilemma. At the end, the state seems to have chosen to focus primarily on the constitution of a Jewish majority – a matter of “demography” (cf. Yonah) – as the principal condition for its existence as the state of the Jewish People; it put relatively few resources into answering the questions of how to converse with, and reinterpret, the Jewish traditions of the communities that constitute this majority. In the famous contest between two possible translations of Theodor Herzl’s *Judenstaat*, the state’s political elite has chosen to focus on the establishment of a “State of Jews,” not necessarily on the constitution of a “Jewish State.” Indeed, this seems to be the core understanding of the meaning of Israel’s being a Jewish nation-state among liberal, secularist Zionist circles, such as *Haaretz*’s editorial board, which clearly states:

Zionism dreamed of a state for the Jews, not a Jewish state: a refuge for members of the Jewish people, not a state with an official religion like Muslim Saudi Arabia. The Balfour Declaration promised a national home, not a religious one. On Israeli identity cards, “Jewish” describes a nationality (May 22, 2013).

But even such a limited understanding of Jewish politics – this, simply, is politics run by people of Jewish origins – is required to address certain issues of Jewish identity in order to run a nation-state that identifies as the state of the Jews. Primarily, the state is required to decide who counts as a Jew and who does not – to outline, in other words, the border-lines and definitions of that nation in the name of which it functions. The solution devised by the allegedly-secular state was to rely on the supposed official representatives of Jewish “religion” (namely, rabbis and politicians who adhere to a conservative, orthodox interpretation of Jewish tradition) to function as the nation’s gatekeepers – whether by assigning them with the responsibility to decide “who is a Jew?” (cf. Gavison) or by giving them the monopolistic authority to manage the Jewish citizens’ personal matters (marriage and divorce), essentially preventing marriages between Jews and non-Jews (Halperin-Kaddari and Yadgar), thus preserving the distinction between these two primary groups.

It is worth noting here that the State of Israel has never attempted to genuinely build an *Israeli* national identity that would be “liberated,” so to speak, from Jewish “religion” and would naturally include the non-Jewish citizens of the state. Indeed, this point was made by none other than the Israeli High Court of Justice, who ruled that “the existence of an Israeli nation has not been proven” (*Haaretz*, October 2, 2013), denying the appellants their demand to be registered not as Jewish nationals but rather as Israeli ones in the state’s official registry.

Instead, the State of Israel has been fostering a de-facto identification between Israeliness and Jewishness, as it has focused on the construction of a *Jewish* national identity, which although highly problematical in its Jewishness (indeed, the meaning of this identification is far from being clear) is nevertheless distinct in one critical respect: it is a national identity reserved for Jews only (Peled; Rouhana and Ghanem; Smoocha; Yiftachel).

In addition, the state has viewed the diversity of Jewish traditions as a threat to what it views as national unity, and devoted its resources and attention to the abusive project of “the melting pot,” which, as its name suggests, viewed these traditions as objects that should be dissolved (cf. Buzaglo 2001, 2002).

Of course, the state still espouses a notion of a distinction between Jewish “religion” and “nationality,” but as has been demonstrated by the political and legal debates surrounding the “paradoxes” this distinction creates, especially those surrounding the “who is a Jew” conundrum (see Gavison), the state, as well as the culture it has built, remain loyal to the notion that these two alleged categories are essentially identical. This idea stands at the core of the national school curriculum, and this is what feeds a series of laws, which enforce a certain, notoriously narrow, interpretation of Jewish tradition (mainly, if not solely, in terms of practice, or rather the prohibition of certain practices) on the public sphere.

This, then, is the key to understanding the Israeli “status quo.” It is not a matter of a compromise and a submission of the secular majority to the whims of the religious minority; rather, it is an expression of the state’s reliance (a state, it should be stressed, that is ruled by representatives of that same secular majority) on a narrow, “religious” (indeed: Orthodox) interpretation of the meaning of Jewish traditions for the purpose of regulating the public sphere and administrating national politics. The sovereign state enforces this interpretation on the public sphere and on its citizens using its primary tool of control: the Law.

It is worth stating this explicitly: the secular majority needs this “religious coercion” more than any other party in this relationship. This coercion is what secures the maintenance and preservation of this majority’s Jewish identity in a nation-state that identifies as the state of the Jews. Being a Jew in Israel means belonging to the majority, which enjoys a privileged position in every aspect of life; whoever is Jewish enjoys a political, symbolic, and cultural capital that is reserved for Jews only (Peled; Rouhana and Ghanem; Smoocha; Yiftachel). Were it not for the state’s enforcement of its narrow interpretation of Judaism on the public sphere, most members of this majority would have been left lacking a possibility to positively understand the meaning of their Jewish identity beyond matters of their decent, which verge on the racial. The state, in other words, enforces “religion” on the public sphere, through the “status quo” arrangements among other ways, and guarantees by this the distinction between Jews and non-Jews, as well as the privileging of the former over the latter (cf. Levy).

### **Jewish Identities in Israel: Beyond the “Religious-Secular” Divide**

A focus on the issue of tradition also sheds new light on the matter of Israeli-Jews’ Jewish identity. Primarily, it exposes the negative and distorting influence of the “cleavage” discourse (cf. Cohen and Susser), which tends to view the binary distinction between “secular” and “religious” as the constitutive axis of Jewish identities in Israel. It is the cleavage discourse that gives birth in the first place to such baseless bipolar images of “the religious” as supposedly purely theological while “the secular” is its complete opposite. Instead, we would be better advised to adopt a “traditionist” (Yadgar 2011a) point of view, one that raises the question of Jewish-Israelis’ attitudes toward their Jewish traditions as the main focus of a nuanced understanding of Jewish identities in Israel.

Take, for example, the secular majority. The positive meaning of its secularity is so enigmatic as to have encouraged the surveyors running the most-comprehensive poll on Jewish beliefs, observance, and customs among Israeli Jews to replace the label “secular” in their questionnaires with the negative designation “not-religious” (Levy, Levinsohn, and Katz).

I have outlined above the background for the formation of Jewish-Israeli secularity – or at least the Jewish identity of most of those who identify as secular as a matter of designating a “default” option in terms of their Jewishness, not as a matter of identifying with an explicit secularist ideology – as an outcome of the waning of dialogue between the individual and her reference group and their traditions. These “secular by default” (Liebman and Yadgar: 156) Israeli Jews have assigned (mostly passively so) the state and its institutions with the role of maintaining their Jewish identity: the state’s institutions educate their children to know certain aspects of Jewish history as their history, they force on them the Jewish (or Hebrew) calendar, they compel them to recognize Shabbat as their day of rest, and they make it difficult for them to marry non-Jews (to mention only some of the facets of this “religious coercion,” or rather “the status quo”).

The key to understanding Jewish-Israeli secularism, then, is its inability to conduct a meaningful dialogue with the Jewish traditions from which it has emerged. This lack has been acknowledged by an important minority of certain intellectuals and elite circles, and it is the driving force behind what is sometimes dubbed the “Jewish renaissance,” which revolves mainly around a mostly textual (at least for the time being) endeavor to get reacquainted with these traditions (Azulay and Tabory; Katz; Sheleg; Werczberger and Azulay).

A lack of dialogue is not reserved for secular Israeli Jews alone. A manifested negation of such a dialogue has also become the founding ideology of Jewish ultra-orthodoxy, which prefers to view its relation with tradition as a dictation or blind obedience, surely not as a conversation: tradition, so the (misleading) ultra-conservative argument goes, is set and sealed, and we are to obey it. As the orthodox novelty states (in the words of “Hatam Sofer” [Rabbi Moses Schreiber, 1762–1839]): “Anything new is prohibited by the Torah.” This stance is of course riddled with an unhealthy dose of self-denial (Sagi: 5-14). It denies the dynamic nature of tradition, and ignores the fact that even the greatest conservative is forced to continuously and incessantly interpret the meaning of tradition’s dictation, consequently updating the meaning of this tradition (Yadgar 2013).

Religious Zionism, which views itself as committed to a reinterpretation of its Jewish tradition in light of modern politics conducts this reinterpretation under the heavy shadow of its commitment to a foreign European tradition (that is, nationalism) and to synthesizing two apparently alien organs. Religious Zionism thus tends to view the nation-state, or its political theology, in the colors of “religious” theology – indeed, as a central element of a messianic project (Batnitzky: 91-100; Schwartz).

At times it seems that Jewish Israeli *masortim* (sg. *masorti*; derived from *masoret*, Hebrew for tradition) – who are mostly Mizrahim (that is, they or their parents originate from Muslim and Arab lands) and tend not to accept the dichotomous distinction entailed in the cleavage discourse as the constitutive axis of their Jewish identity – are those who engage in the most challenging dialogue with their Jewish traditions. But they do so without proper

institutional support, and are constantly, harshly criticized for what both “religious” and “secular” Israeli-Jews depict as the inconsistent nature of the *masorti* way of life. *Masortim* present in a rather immediate, ever-developing way the possibility to conduct a fruitful dialogue with tradition and nevertheless remain an active, participating actor in modern life. It is not hard to see how they become threatening to both of those competing opponents, the “religious” and the “secular,” who build their identity as mutual opposites, assuming as they do that modernity leaves us with only a limited choice: either we abandon tradition, or we blindly obey its dictates (Yadgar 2011b).

### Concluding Remarks

The need to transcend the religion and politics discourse is far from being limited to the Jewish-Israeli case. Indeed, it is the critique of the very categories that lie at this binary’s foundation in a Western, Christian context that encourage a reevaluation of some of the more taken-for-granted aspects of Israeli politics. What seems more perplexing in the Jewish-Israeli case is not only the (allegedly modern, secular) nation-state’s essential reliance on what it – or rather the Zionist ideology upon which it is based – views as the essentially foreign “Jewish religion” for the management of the state’s ethno-politic, but rather the insistence on viewing this as “Jewish politics.” In terms of a traditionist discourse, one that is concerned with the phenomenological and existential matter of our relations with our traditions, this is indeed a misnomer. As I suggested above, a focus on this traditionist point of view exposes what may be termed the misinterpretation and misappropriation of Jewish traditions in modern Israeli politics, used as they are mainly to delineate the border lines between the collective, national self and others. Such a focus would also offer, I would argue, alternative venues through which “Jewish politics” can be properly and more constructively understood. This, surely, is a matter for an interpretation of a different type than the one offered above (for an insightful example of such an interpretation, see Faur).

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