
Six Theses on the Sustainability of a Minority Culture in a Majority Society: The Jewish and Muslim Cases

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In 2010, I participated in one of the workshops devoted to “Judaism and Islam in America.” I was asked to reflect on the question of assimilation and authenticity in the lives of Jews and Muslims in America. The core tension inhering in this question was how to understand and manage the relationship between preserving a faith or cultural tradition and the desire and need to be part of the American world in which Jews and Muslim live. I recall two impressions from the conversations that ensued around this question. First, there was a sense that Jews in western societies, by virtue of their long-standing presence — and equally long-standing outsider status — had struggled with this balancing act for quite some time. Their example might bear some historical lessons of value for Muslims, who, in the main, were much more recent arrivals in Europe and America. Second, the Jewish participants in the workshop, all of whom were, I believe, non-Orthodox, tended to retreat from a singular and unbending notion of authenticity and to highlight the elasticity of the interpretive practices of their tradition.¹ Muslim participants, by contrast, appeared to feel much less at liberty to reinterpret their scriptural tradition. It seemed that they were committed to the authority of the word of the Prophet and relatively untroubled by the notion of authenticity.

Notwithstanding the articulated differences over authenticity, there was also a sense of common cause. Participants from both groups recognized that their faith traditions have generated rich cultural heritages and habits that have survived and even flourished

¹ This view resonates with the formulation of the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, who argues against a view of tradition as passive receipt of a set of unchanging ancient norms: “Tradition is not simply the totality of that which the community possesses as its cultural patrimony and which it bequeaths to its posterity; it is a specific selection from this patrimony, which is elevated and garbed with religious authority. It proclaims certain things, sentences, or insights to be Torah, and thus connects them with the revelation. In the process, the original meaning of revelation as a unique, positively established, and clearly delineated realm of propositions is put in doubt — and thus a development as fruitful as it is unpredictable begins which is highly instructive for the religious problematic of the concept of tradition.” Gershom Scholem, “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism,” in idem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 285–286.

in conditions of dispersion from the homeland. Muslim participants looked on admiringly at the success of Jews in America in creating a thick web of communal and educational institutions, as well as in learning how to assert their voice effectively in the political process. Jewish participants looked on with nostalgia at the steadfast commitment to faith and authority of first-generation Muslim Americans. And yet, anxiety over the erosion of tradition and identity was palpable in both groups, each of which represents a small minority in a larger majority society. How indeed is it possible to hold on to one's tradition and live in the wider world? Can a reasonable balance be found?

As a further prod to the discussion that started four years ago, and drawing on my own stance as a Jew and a scholar of Jewish history, I would like to propose the following theses that speak to the challenges of minority groups such as Muslims or Jews in the midst of a larger majority society:

- 1) The boundary between religion and culture is porous. To be sure, the definitional boundaries of both terms, as Max Weber and Raymond Williams famously noted in their respective studies of the two, are notoriously open-ended.² That said, ritual-rich religions such as Islam and Judaism generate thick cultural webs, based on the sumptuary, sartorial, linguistic, and more generally, social and economic, norms they develop in order to mark out group difference. Despite constant efforts at maintaining a pristine state of ritual purity, the gates of cultural exchange, to paraphrase Maimonides, are never closed.
- 2) Striking a balance between preserving group ritual or cultural norms, on one hand, and integration into the host society, on the other, is unavoidable. Many have lamented the strong centrifugal pull of the wider world, but it is irresistible. Especially in our fast-paced, globalized 21st-century world, each of us as individuals — and together as members of groups — lives at the intersection of different cultural boundaries. It is not simply that balancing competing cultural identities is unavoidable. The act of balancing is, in itself, vitalizing: an essential form of cultural exercise that wards off atrophy and stimulates the cultural muscles. As discomfiting as it may be to acknowledge and engage in, this balancing act has been a key ingredient in the adaptive mechanism that helps explain the Jews' unlikely survival through history.
- 3) Even more boldly, it is important to acknowledge that assimilation can be a "blessing." This provocative claim borrows from the memorable commencement address delivered by the historian and former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Gerson Cohen, to a group of Jewish educators in 1966.³ Cohen's lecture, "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History," attacked a long-standing belief that Jewish survival and vitality rested on "a tenacious adherence . . . to all basic external traditional forms," which included, according to the Hebrew acronym "ShaLeM", names (*sbemoj*), language (*lashon*), and dress (*malbush*). Cohen pointed out that, in stark contrast to the

² See Max Weber's 1920 book, *Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), and Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958).

³ Gerson D. Cohen, *The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History*, Commencement Address Delivered at Hebrew College, Brookline, MA (1966). See the essay of Riv-Ellen Prell in this issue of *The Muslim World*.

self-perception of cultural resistance, Jews have constantly and readily adopted the names, language, and dress norms of the surrounding environment. He noticed this not simply in an obvious setting such as nineteenth-century Germany, but throughout the long annals of the Jews, in ancient Babylon and Alexandria, medieval Cordoba, and early modern Constantinople. Cohen moved from this historical observation to the broader assertion that “not only did a certain amount of assimilation and acculturation not impede Jewish continuity and creativity, but that in a profound sense this assimilation and acculturation was even a stimulus to original thinking and expression and, consequently, a source of renewed vitality.” He was relying on the famous distinction made by the Zionist thinker and Hebrew essayist, Ahad Ha-am, between “imitative” and “competitive” forms of assimilation. The former entailed a loss of a group’s own sense of cultural distinctiveness, whereas the latter entailed a constant negotiation between cultural systems that strengthened and expanded one’s own dynamic and evolving tradition. On Cohen’s reading, competitive assimilation sustained Judaism over the ages, preventing it from descending into a state of ossification.

- 4) Cultural difference is a positive value. Few have articulated the point as clearly as the fascinating and underappreciated twentieth-century Jewish thinker, Simon Rawidowicz. In 1945, Rawidowicz wrote an essay in Hebrew under the title “*Em kol Herut*,” the mother of all freedom.⁴ What was the mother of all freedom? Rawidowicz’s response to that question was a gloss on Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s famous “four freedoms,” articulated in his State of the Union address of January 1941. In addition to those mentioned by President Roosevelt (freedom of speech and worship and from want and fear), Rawidowicz added a fifth that he labeled *libertas differendi*, the right to be different, both for individuals and groups. He was suggesting a corrective to a certain form of liberalism regnant in his day that focused on the rights of individuals to the exclusion of group rights. In doing so, Rawidowicz was not surrendering the universalist ideal. Rather, he believed that “the oneness of man will be fulfilled when the world is not dominated by any doctrine that forces smaller groups to adapt themselves to stronger ones . . . The oneness of man will be realized only when the freedom to differ is accepted.”⁵ Without the rich mosaic of group difference, he argued, the world would be bland and colorless, at best, and beholden to a putatively neutral, but dangerously coercive universalism, at worst.
- 5) The balancing act between preservation of difference and positive assimilation reaches a most interesting and important point in law. Law invokes and demands authority, issuing, as both Judaism and Islam claim, from a divine source. But its interpretation rests in the hands of humans, recalling the ancient rabbinic statement that “the Torah spoke in the language of man” (*dibrab Torah ki-lesbon bene adam*). This is not only a hermeneutic principle. It is a constitutive force. As the late scholar Robert Cover famously argued, law assumes social significance through the narratives we construct: “The normative universe is held together by the force of interpretive commitments.”⁶

⁴ Simon Rawidowicz, “*Em kol herut*” (Mother of all freedom), *Metsudab* 3–4 (1945), 5–20. See the English translation in Simon Rawidowicz, “*Libertas Differendi*: The Right to Be Different,” *State of Israel, Diaspora, and Jewish Continuity* (Brandeis University Press: Hanover, NH, 1986), 118–130.

⁵ “*Libertas Differendi*,” 125.

⁶ Robert M. Cover, The Supreme Court, 1982 Term – Foreword: *Nomos* and Narrative, 97. *HARV. L. REV.* 4 (1983).

In the hands of its interpreters and implementers, law undergoes change over time. The fate of *Halakbab* (Jewish law) in modern Western societies over the past two centuries is instructive. It is a story of adaptation, accommodation, and diminution of scope, with the convening of the Paris Sanhedrin by Napoleon in 1807 as a decisive turning point. It is at that assembly where Jewish leaders were impelled by Napoleon's authority to acknowledge the presence and at times superiority of civil law over religious law.⁷ And yet, despite the legacy of the Paris Sanhedrin, law endures as a major organizing principle and ethnic marker for a small, but growing portion of the Jewish population.

Meanwhile, contemporary Islamic law is undergoing its own transformation, as its expositors debate the way forward for Muslim minorities in non-Muslim societies, particularly in Europe and North America. Among the questions that legal theorists are exploring are whether and how to justify Muslim existence under non-Muslim rule and, more boldly, whether and how citizenship by Muslims in Western societies can be grounded in Muslim sources. This contemporary legal discourse reveals the shifting nature of law — and the way in which law serves as a mediating agent between group distinctiveness and assimilation.

- 6) The secular is not the sworn enemy of the religious. Although it is undeniable that forces of secularization can erode the cultural distinctiveness and guiding legal principles of minority groups such as Jews and Muslims, “secularization” is itself a complex and dialectical process. Far from entailing a precipitous and linear decline of religion, a point even acknowledged by erstwhile secularization theorists such as Peter Berger, the “secular age” resists easy characterization.⁸ On one hand, new challenges undeniably confront organized religion, as it seeks to compete in the wide-open, aggressively pluralist, capital-driven global marketplace. On the other, there is an unmistakable and quite visible trend toward what José Casanova has called “the deprivatization of religion.”⁹

Deprivatization suggests to us that increasingly assertive claims to a religious presence in the public sphere are not foreign to the secular age, but fully part of it. If that be so, then Muslims and Jews may and should feel some measure of optimism as they go about navigating between the poles of group distinctiveness and positive (and unavoidable) assimilation. While exhausting, this work of navigation is a form of cultural exercise that allows not only for survival, but for creative adaptation and reinvigoration in the modern world.

⁷ See, for example, Paula E. Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁸ See, for example, Peter Berger, ed. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999).

⁹ This is a key argument in José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7.