Chapter Seven

Religion and Deviance: Theocrats vs. Democrats

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Not much has been written about the interface of religion and deviance. One of the first questions we need to ask is, “What is this interface?” A few possibilities come to mind. One is deviant forms of religion itself. Another may be deviance in the actual practice of specific religious rituals. There are probably more possibilities. This chapter focuses on public constructions of various forms of deviant behavior, viewed as such by researchers of deviance and criminologists, within a specific religious community, and tries to understand their meanings and implications. The specific community on which I will focus is the ultra-orthodox—Haredim in Hebrew—in Israel.

The Context

The state of Israel was established in 1948 as a “Jewish democracy.” The problem created by this political characterization has accompanied the state from the day of its inception. On the one hand, “democracy” denotes a political structure associated with options, freedom to make informed choices among competing alternatives, and increasingly so with universalistic human rights. On the other hand, one of the central cultural building blocks of Judaism is religion, which—almost by definition—is non-democratic. By not separating the state from religion and declaring itself a “Jewish democracy,” an inherent structural and conceptual tension was introduced into the political nature of the state of Israel from its modern beginnings. This structural tension forms the central contextual background of this chapter. In reality, the concrete existence of a “Jewish democracy” is a viable possibility that ultimately hinges on how one defines “democracy” and “religion.” To enable this co-existence, one must define both in fairly spacious and tolerant terms.¹

¹ The analysis presented in this chapter focuses on the dominant and hegemonic Jewish majority of Israel. While Israeli Arabs constitute about 20% of the population,
The tension between conceptualizing Israel as a modern Jewish secular state and the views of the more fundamentalist religious element of its population is nothing but a new issue (cf. Samet 1979, Aran 1991, Friedman 1991, 1997, Sprinzak 1991, Caplan and Stadler 2009). The establishment of the state of Israel was the result of the efforts of the secular Zionist movement. That movement was most certainly considered by the majority of Jews living in Europe and North America prior to World War II as a small and deviant movement (see Rosenthal 1954). Moreover, many orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jewish key figures have viewed secular Zionism with distaste, scorn and hostility.

Thus, from the day the state of Israel was established, the non-Zionist ultra-orthodox challenge to the secular state of Israel was expressed in a forceful manner. Orthodox and Haredi Jews who embraced a non-Zionist religious ideology had a strong motivation to rationalize their stand and expose the Zionist position (and, in fact, all other Jewish interpretations) as morally inferior, dangerous and theoretically wrong.2

Overall, it is possible to discern five major interpretations of Judaism. Each of these constitutes an ideological core around which scores of Jews flock and maintain different cultural and social systems: 1. orthodox, 2. ultra-orthodox, 3. conservatives, 4. reform, and 5. seculars. Obviously, these camps are not homogeneous, and there are further sub-divisions and rivalries within them. Indeed, some of the variance within these groups is rather impressive. For example, secular Jews range between those who practice a secular life style (probably the majority) and a much smaller minority which has developed a secular consciousness and ideology. The ultra-orthodox can be divided along such lines as the recognition of the Zionist idea of the state of Israel as a Jewish state and anti-Zionists, not to mention different (and competing) fractions of Hasiduyot (small or large groups of Hassidim weaving networks around one Rabbi or Admor). Politically speaking, at least two major—albeit not homogenous—camps can be identified among

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