

Modern Orthodoxy in the 21st Century: Approaches to Modernity – Two Models

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Spring 5766

Selected Bibliography:

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SOME COMMENTS ON CENTRIST ORTHODOXY

Carl Becker, the great American historian, once said: "It is important, every so often, to look at the things that go without saying to be sure that they are still going." I would add the need for intellectual vigilance to this reminder for practical caution by paraphrasing his aphorism: "It is important, every so often, to look at what we are saying about the things that go without saying to make sure we know what we are talking about."

In reflecting on some of the foundations of our *Weltanschauung*, I do not presume to be imparting new information. The task I have set for myself is to summarize and clarify, rather than to innovate. Dr. Johnson once said that it is important not only to instruct people but also to remind them. I shall take his sage advice for this discourse.

We seem to be suffering from a terminological identity crisis. We now call ourselves "Centrist Orthodoxy." There was a time, not too long ago, when we referred to ourselves as "Modern Orthodox." Others tell us that we should call ourselves simply "Orthodox," without any qualifiers, and leave it to the other Orthodox groups to conjure up adjectives for themselves. I agree with the last view in principle, but shall defer to the advocates of "Centrist Orthodoxy" for two reasons: First, it is a waste of intellectual effort and precious time to argue about titles when there are so many truly significant issues that clamor for our attention. In no way should the choice of one adjective over the other be invested with any substantive significance or assumed to be a "signal" of ideological position.

This article is based upon an address at the Conference of the Educators Council of America at the Homowack Lodge, Spring Glen, N.Y., October 26, 1985.

Walter S. Wurzbarger

Rabbi Wurzbarger, Editor Emeritus of *Tradition*, recently published *Ethics of Responsibility: Pluralistic Approaches to Covenantal Ethics*.

RAV JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK AS POSEK OF POST-MODERN ORTHODOXY

In the circles of what is labelled "Modern Orthodoxy" or "Centrist Orthodoxy," Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *z.t.l.* is referred to as "the Rav." This appellation is not merely a sign of respect and reverence accorded a charismatic luminary, the mentor of generations of Rabbis, academicians and communal leaders, but it also attests to his role as *the* authority figure of those segments of the Orthodox community which see no conflict between commitment to Torah and full participation in scientific and cultural activities of modern society.

To the popular mind, unfortunately, "Modern Orthodoxy" represents a movement which is characterized by willingness to make all sorts of concessions to modernity at the expense of genuine religious commitment. It is perceived as a "moderate" brand of halakhic Judaism which lacks the fervor and passion associated with the *Haredi* community.

In this misinterpretation of the ideology of "Modern Orthodoxy," the adjective "modern" is treated as a modifier rather than as an attribute. To illustrate this distinction, there are all kinds of presidents: popular or unpopular, dynamic or passive, honest or corrupt. In these cases, the adjective functions as an attribute, characterizing a president. But when we speak of a past president, an honorary president, or a dead president, we are no longer dealing with presidents; the adjective does not merely add a qualification to the noun, but completely modifies the meaning of the noun. Similarly, it is widely taken for granted that "Modern Orthodoxy" is not really an authentic form of Orthodoxy, but a hybrid of an illicit union between modernity and Orthodoxy, a kind of oxymoron. Its oppo-

The papers by Professors Wurzbarger, Carmy and Sokol were presented at the Fifth Orthodox Forum, March 14, 1993, convened by Yeshiva University President Norman Lamm.

nents ridicule it as a compromise designed to facilitate entry into a modern lifestyle by offering less stringent interpretations of halakha and even condoning laxity in religious observance.

Because the term "Modern Orthodoxy" has acquired such a pejorative meaning, Rabbi Norman Lamm has proposed that we replace it with "Centrist Orthodoxy."¹ In my opinion, "Post-Modern Orthodoxy" would be the most appropriate designation for a movement which stands not for evasion or accommodation but for uncompromising confrontation of modernity.

It is this type of halakhic Judaism which can invoke the spiritual authority of the Rav, who never wavered in his demand for scrupulous adherence to halakha. His aim was not to make halakhic observance more convenient. On the contrary, in many areas, such as *hilkhot avelut*, the construction of *eruvim* in cities, refusal to grant a *shetar mekhirah* authorizing non-Jewish workers to operate Jewish factories or commercial establishments on Shabbat, the Rav has consistently issued rulings that surpass in stringency those of right-wing authorities. He was especially particular in observing all the Brisker

The Ideology of Modern Orthodoxy

by Saul J. Berman, Feb 2001

The Haredi experiment starts with the assumption that the two worlds are so radically opposed that the only way to safeguard the Orthodox worldview is to maximize separateness. This required the development of a vision in which the ideal life is led entirely within the confines of the Orthodox community - men in kollelim, women at home, children in schools that reflect the desired uniformity of religious behavior. When economic conditions require adult departure from safe ground, the deviant experience should be minimized in time, in degree of intersection with the external world, and should not be granted any value for itself.

This approach further urges maximum separation from the external culture - negating of general knowledge except as a neutral tool; distancing from cultural currents such as democracy and equality; avoiding the mechanisms of transmission of the cultural values of the non-Haredi world; and generally maintaining an attitude of spiritual superiority toward outsiders of any sort.

While Modern Orthodoxy differs from the approach of Haredi Orthodoxy on most of the issues above, we remain united with them in the theological and halakhic commitments that are at the core of our common tradition. Each of these two experiments is experiencing great success in certain areas and intense problems in others. Both approaches would be better served by a cooperative spirit in which each attempted to help the other maximize its strengths and deal creatively with its weaknesses. A similar spirit should animate all of the varied segments of the Jewish community.

The Modern Orthodox experiment begins with the assumption that Orthodoxy can preserve its integrity and passion, and even be enriched, by its intersection with modernity, and that the interaction will allow Orthodoxy to bring to the broader world a clearer vision of the grandeur of Torah. On the other hand, this approach does not deny that there are areas of powerful inconsistency and conflict between Torah and modern culture that need to be filtered out in order to preserve the integrity of halakha.

Modern Orthodoxy is a difficult path that requires constant attentiveness to the maintenance of Jewish wholeness in the face of the distraction of material excess and pure self gratification. It is a path that requires filtering out the degraded values of the low culture while welcoming and integrating the advances in knowledge and understanding being achieved in the high culture. It welcomes the opportunities created by modern society to be productive citizens engaged in the Divine work of transforming the world to benefit humanity...