

Bridging the Religious-Secular Divide

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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Of the many causes of political polarization in the United States, the conflict between religion and secularism is the oldest and deepest. Easing this conflict — desirable for its own sake — stands a chance of also tempering the increasingly entrenched enmity in our politics between right and left.

Americans' stance on religion today often correlates with their location on the political spectrum. Although men and women of the right may hold secular views and men and women of the left can be found in houses of worship, practitioners of traditional faith tend to embrace conservative ideas while convinced secularists are more likely to congregate in progressive circles.

At least one opinion, however, transcends the religious-secular divide: The religious and the secular typically share the conviction that between the two communities lies an unbridgeable gulf. This reinforces the belief common to contemporary conservatives and progressives that they inhabit separate and incurably hostile worlds.

But what if the conviction that religion and secularism are intractable adversaries is mistaken? What if a certain disabling dogmatism afflicts both the religious spirit and the secular spirit? What if reexamination of traditional religious sources and of seminal works of secularism revealed that both contained an openness to, and even imperative to consider respectfully and learn from, the achievements of the other?

My friend Micah Goodman explores these enticing possibilities in his splendid new book about religion and secularism in Israel. The implications of his argument are far-reaching.

Published last month in Hebrew and not yet translated into English, the book nevertheless bears on its title page an English rendering, “The Philosophic Roots of the Religious-Secular Divide.” This captures an important dimension of Goodman’s contribution. But a more accurate translation, and one closer to the spirit of the book, would be, “Return Without Faith: Another Secularism and Another Religiosity.”

A research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Goodman has developed an expertise in diagnosing false dichotomies that have taken hold in the Jewish state and in showing Israelis how to extricate themselves from those intellectual traps. In his 2017 Israeli bestseller, “Catch-67: The Ideas Behind the Controversy That Is Tearing Israel Apart,” he argued that debate about the territory that Israel captured from Jordan in the Six Day War had reached an impasse because both the left and the right are correct.

The left is correct, contended Goodman, that remaining in the West Bank produces an existential threat. Israel can’t preserve both its Jewish and its democratic character if it continues to rule indefinitely over approximately 2.5 million West Bank Palestinians. Denying them citizenship subverts Israel’s democratic character while offering them citizenship erodes its Jewish character.

The right is also correct, maintained Goodman, that withdrawing from Judea and Samaria (the Biblical names, preferred by the right, for the West Bank) presents an existential threat. Returning to the pre-June 1967 borders would undercut Israel’s ability to defend itself because Islamic extremists would flow into the West Bank, Hamas would decapitate the Palestinian Authority, and a jihadi regime would establish fortifications on the hills overlooking the greater Tel Aviv municipal area.

Yet both left and right are also wrong, Goodman insists, by virtue of their inability to recognize the truth in the other's claims. The way out of the trap, he counsels, is to take seriously *both* the demographic threat *and* the security threat.

The spirit of "all or nothing," according to Goodman, also ensnares Israeli thinking about religion and secularism. An Orthodox Jew and a grateful student of secular Zionism, he lives the conflict his book describes.

An insider in both camps — and therefore simultaneously a perpetual outsider — Goodman provides a sympathetic distillation of each side's arguments. That sets the stage for an account of how, by remaining true to themselves, the antagonists can become allies. Weaving together traditional Jewish sources, classical philosophical texts, ideas of the intellectual founding fathers of Zionism, social science, and contemporary cultural criticism, Goodman fashions a middle way that eases but does not overcome — indeed it rejects the ambition to overcome — the conflict between religion and secularism.

According to the classic critique of religion — which blossomed during the Enlightenment but stretches back to Lucretius — faith "cultivates hatred, blindness, and violence." A more nuanced critique of Orthodox Judaism, Goodman observes, blames it for fostering a sense of guilt stemming from the experience of always falling short of God's commandments, coupled with a censoriousness toward others who similarly prove ill-equipped to meet divine demands. Orthodox Judaism also sacrifices intellectual integrity when it calls on believers to reject science and history where they conflict with faith. And it betrays the moral conscience insofar as it denies basic tenets of modern freedom and equality such as the obligation to ensure that all occupations and opportunities are in principle open to women.

Secularism also has been subject to a radical critique and a more nuanced one. The former, according to Goodman, declares that the atrocities perpetrated on an unprecedented scale in the 20th century in the name of Nazism and communism have roots in enlightened Europe's repudiation of sacred restraints. The latter, he explains, holds secularism responsible for generating a hubristic and emaciated individualism that has weakened families, eroded the associations of civil society, and created a society of lonely, isolated, and narcissistic people. Draining the world of transcendent principles and enduring duties, secularism has left humanity more exposed and vulnerable to the enervating lures of consumerism, the entertainment industry, and social media.

Goodman believes that secularists are correct that Orthodox Judaism betrays a tendency to inculcate a demeaning obedience to inherited authority and that Orthodox Jews are correct that secularism often fans the flames of reckless rebellion against authority. But both are also wrong, he argues, insofar as they equate the excesses with the essence.

In a wonderful reconstruction of generally neglected intellectual resources within secular Zionism and within the Orthodox Judaism of Israel's Mizrahi — that is, Middle Eastern — Jews, Goodman shows that not only the critics but in many cases the defenders of secularism and religion overlook the dialogue that both sides authorize and even require.

The secular emphasis on human freedom, Goodman argues, can inspire non-believers to break free from the prejudice that religion only diminishes and never enriches and elevates. It can also emancipate them to consider afresh, without embracing faith, venerable teachings about family, community, and tradition that the secular world has obscured but the religious world has preserved.

At the same time, the biblical notion that because human beings are created in God's image each is endowed with an innate dignity should open believers' eyes, without diminishing their religious devotion, to the variety of ways of being human. This variety includes the individual freedom,

equality before the law, and celebration of each person's unique gifts that secularism at its best cherishes.

Perhaps Goodman understates the enduring tension between religion and secularism. Orthodox Judaism declares God and His law the highest authority while secularism recognizes no higher authority than human will and reason. Accordingly, the more a secular Jew immerses himself or herself in Judaism's sacred texts and traditional practices, the more he or she confronts the steadfast claims of divine revelation. And the more a religious Jew examines secular writings, culture, and daily life, the more he or she encounters the resolute affirmation of human sovereignty.

It might be more accurate to say, however, that Goodman turns the tension between religion and secularism to the advantage of both by focusing on the truths that they can teach one another while acknowledging that a perfect reconciliation is bound to elude us.

Recovering "another secularism" and "another religiosity" may have the additional political benefit — in the United States as in Israel — of tempering the increasingly entrenched political enmity in both countries between right and left.

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