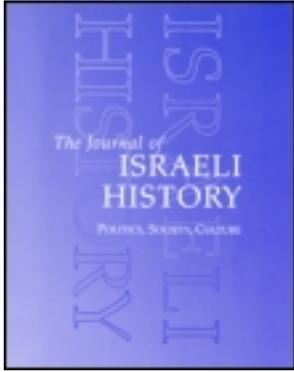


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Zionism and Judaism: The Paradox of National Liberation

Michael Walzer

This article discusses the paradoxical history of national liberation and religious revival as manifested in three states that achieved independence after World War II: India, Algeria and Israel. Although the original leaders of all three national-liberation movements—the Indian National Congress, Labor Zionism, and the Algerian FLN—were secular, in the states that they created a politics rooted in what can loosely be called fundamentalist religion is today very powerful. The resistance of the traditional elites to national liberation, which is by definition a secularizing, modernizing and developmental creed, takes on a new ideological form after the achievement of political independence, when the defenders of traditional religion, themselves renewed and modernized, begin the construction of a counterrevolutionary politics.

This article aims to describe a recurrent pattern in the history of national liberation and religious revival. I will discuss a small set of cases: the creation of three independent states in the years after World War II—India and Israel immediately after, and Algeria roughly 15 years later—and I will focus on the political movements that achieved their independence, drawing the larger number of my illustrations from the history of Zionism. I will also refer—because I have written about it and because it has been a general reference for Western writers about revolution and national liberation—to the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, which is arguably the first example, in literature if not in history, of the liberation of a nation from foreign rule.

I do not claim that the pattern I am going to describe is universal or that it is precisely the same in all its iterations. I follow the maxim about political life that nothing is the same as anything else—nonetheless, some things are similar to other

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things, and comparisons among similar events and processes can help us understand both the similarities and the differences. My aim is understanding, not scientific explanation. The pattern I describe cannot be expressed as a set of covering laws, because there are many cases that the “laws” would not cover. Indeed, I am not sure that my account covers any of the cases of national liberation in the Christian world—in Protestant North America or in the Catholic South or in Orthodox Greece. Still, my three cases do involve three different religions, and they are exemplary, I think, for our own experience of global politics.

National liberation is obviously a success story in these cases: the three nations were indeed freed from foreign rule. At the same time, however, the states that now exist are not quite the same as the states envisioned by the original leaders of the national-liberation movements. One difference is central, and I will keep coming back to it: all three movements—the Indian National Congress, Labor Zionism, and the Algerian FLN—were secular movements, and yet in the states that they created a politics rooted in what we can loosely call fundamentalist religion is today very powerful. This unexpected outcome is part of what I mean by “the paradox of national liberation.”

Consider the original enterprise: national liberation is an ambitious and also, from the beginning, an ambiguous project because the nation has to be “liberated” not only from external oppressors—in a way, that is the easy part—but also from the internal effects of external oppression. One of these is the ongoing domination of traditional elites, the mediators of foreign rule—I mean, the men and women, mostly men, who move back and forth between the subject nation and its rulers, negotiating with the rulers, bribing them when necessary, accommodating their demands when that seems necessary, smoothing over a difficult and often humiliating relationship. The figure of the “court Jew” has parallels in every nation ruled by foreigners, and one of the aims of national liberation is the elimination of this role and the defeat of the people who made it their own.

But there is another, even more important, effect of external oppression that has to be overcome, and that is the passivity, the quietude, the deep lethargy of the dominated people. No nation can live for long under foreign rule or, like the Jews, in exile, without accommodating to its condition and making its peace with the powers-that-be. Life itself is an accommodation of that sort, the alternative always being less attractive, and the accommodation will be more or less profound depending on the severity of the conditions that have to be accommodated and the number of years, or decades, or centuries during which those conditions prevail. In the sphere of politics, accommodation takes a variety of forms: fatalistic resignation, withdrawal from political activity to familial or communal concerns, even an acceptance of the political “superiority” of the foreign rulers. In this latter case, the local culture is reconceived as somehow unsuited to politics, devoted to higher, more spiritual pursuits. “They,” the British, the French, Europeans generally, have a talent for politics; they have the ruthlessness necessary for imperial domination; “we” submit because we are focused on more important things.¹

Once people have settled in and adjusted themselves, one way or another, to a particular version of foreign rule, the men and women who suddenly appear and offer to liberate them are likely to be regarded with suspicion—as Moses was when he tried to explain to the Israelites that they were about to be delivered from Egyptian slavery. Here the biblical text tells a classic story, which is repeated again and again when young and enthusiastic liberators first encounter the people they mean to liberate and find them frightened and reluctant. The liberators quickly discover that they need (in modern terms) to “raise the consciousness” of the people before liberation is possible.

And what can this mean except to oppose the people’s already existing consciousness, which has been shaped by oppression and accommodation? Raising consciousness is a persuasive enterprise, but it quickly turns into a cultural war between the liberators and what can be called the traditionalists. This can be a very tense business. It is possible for a charismatic leader, like Gandhi in India, to adapt the traditional culture to the needs of national liberation, but adaptations of this sort are likely to encounter fierce opposition; their success may well be brief. And even Gandhi was deeply opposed to many aspects of Hindu culture, the fate of the “untouchables” most importantly. He was assassinated by someone committed to a more literal or narrow or, perhaps, fundamentalist version of Hinduism.

I have taken this example, and all my examples, from the history of nationalist struggle, but the case is similar with revolutionary politics, whose protagonists even more obviously set themselves against longstanding patterns of submission and accommodation. Social revolution is a war against the actually existing society; national liberation is a war against the actually existing nation.

It is also, often, a religious or, better, an anti-religious war. The traditionalist accommodation to foreign rule commonly takes religious forms. This is so in part for the obvious reason that otherworldliness offers comforts that are always available, however bad things are here and now. But religion also generates fantasies of reversal and triumph in this world—and then, intermittently, revivalist and millenarian movements, which are sometimes tumultuous, but rarely effective. Millenarianism looks like opposition to foreign rule, and may be that briefly, but over the long run it is a form of political accommodation—for it does not produce a steady or persistent oppositional politics, and the millennium never arrives.² There is also another, more concrete form of accommodation, which does not look forward to apocalyptic events. Most religions prescribe a this-worldly regimen that can and should be established right now and that provides benefits right now for traditional religious leaders (though not only for them).

But neither millenarian nor traditionalist politics invites ideological commitment or long-term activism. Nor does it promise individual freedom, political independence, citizenship, democratic government, scientific education, or economic advance. It is for the sake of all these that the nationalist or revolutionary militants need to transform the people in whose name they are acting—that means, to defeat the people’s religious leaders and to overcome their customary way of life. The Indian

novelist V. S. Naipaul, writing 30 years after Indian national liberation, perfectly captures the attitude of the liberators toward the religion of their people:

Hinduism . . . has exposed us to a thousand years of defeat and stagnation. It has given men no idea of a contract with other men, no idea of a state. It has enslaved one quarter of the population and always left the whole fragmented and vulnerable. Its philosophy of withdrawal has diminished men intellectually and not equipped them to respond to challenge; it has stifled growth.³

National liberation, by contrast, is a secularizing, modernizing, and developmental creed. Newness is the mantra of its militants. They offer the oppressed people a new beginning, a new politics, a new culture, a new economy; they aim to create new men and women. Thus David Ben-Gurion insisted on several occasions that the most important contribution of the Labor Zionist movement was the creation of a new kind of Jewish man. And, similarly, Franz Fanon: “There is a new kind of Algerian man The power of the Algerian Revolution . . . resides in the radical mutation that the Algerian has undergone.”⁴ We can gain some sense of what all this means from the history of the United States: what Ralph Waldo Emerson and his contemporaries called “the American newness” was achieved through the escape from old-world tyrannies and traditions. In America, as in ancient Israel, the victory of the new required a geographical move as well as a political movement. But the same sense of starting over is present in all the cases of national liberation, even if the new beginning is in an old place.

Of course, this newness encounters resistance, which begins as a stubborn allegiance to the-way-things-have-always-been, but soon becomes ideological and therefore also new: fundamentalism and ultra-orthodoxy are both modernist reactions to attempts at modernist transformation. The slogan of Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy, “Everything new is forbidden by the Torah,” would have made the historic accommodation to exile impossible, for Jewish wandering required a lively adaptability and a readiness for innovation.⁵ But the slogan works well against attempts to bring the exile to an end, and one can find similar examples of opposition to the newness of national liberation in India and Algeria. What is more surprising is the reappearance of this opposition after the achievement of political independence, when the defenders of traditional religion, themselves renewed and modernized, begin the construction of a counterrevolutionary politics.

In order to avoid too schematic an account, I shall now provide a brief example of what I am talking about. Consider the tense relationship of Zionism and Judaism. Zionism comes late in Jewish history, after some 2,000 years of exile had produced a religious/political culture adapted to statelessness and dispersion. I do not know how long it takes to develop a culture of that kind. We can find signs of the adaptation very early on—as in Jeremiah’s famous letter to the exiles in Babylonia (Jeremiah 29:4–7). But the social construction of exile as the prototypical Jewish condition took many centuries, and the construction is very powerful. A yearning for return to the long-lost homeland played an important part in exilic culture; the idea of political independence played no part at all.

The Jewish people have forgotten, Leo Pinsker wrote in the early Zionist pamphlet, *Auto-Emancipation*, what political independence is.⁶

Exilic politics had only two aspects: first, Jews submitted to gentile rule: they practiced a politics of deference. And, second, they waited patiently for divine redemption: they practiced a politics of deferred hope. (In fact, there is much more to say about the actual political experience of diaspora Jewry, but this is the dualism that is reflected in its law and literature.) Jewish submission would last until the coming of the messiah, and the coming of the messiah was in God's hands. Deference and deferment: the particular practices that this politics required had to be reinvented in each diaspora setting, but this was no makeshift invention. It was indeed the natural politics of the Jews in the eyes of the Jews themselves, the necessary consequence of the place that God had assigned them in world history.

It follows, then, that any political effort to escape the exile would have to be the work of people who rejected this divine assignment, who broke with the culture of deference and deferment. But since this culture was a central part of Judaism as it existed in the nineteenth century, Zionism was, and could only be, the work of people who were hostile to Judaism: they loved their people but hated the political and religious culture of their people. If pressed, I would qualify that statement in all sorts of ways, but in its naked form, unqualified, it helps explain a centrally important Zionist goal: "the negation of the exile." This is not the same as the end of the exile. Of course, Zionists wanted to bring the exile to an end, but they also believed that it would be impossible to do that without first "negating" the cultural predispositions and habits of the exile. It was necessary to overcome the remarkable adaptation of the Jews to their captivity among the gentiles, and the name of that adaptation was "Judaism."

To be sure, Ahad Ha-am, the leading Zionist intellectual, sharply attacked writers who understood the whole of Jewish history "to be one long mistake that requires immediate, complete rectification." He acknowledged in a private letter that Zionism may involve a "latent contradiction [with Judaism] deep within the soul," but he consistently opposed what he called "defiant apostasy."⁷ Nonetheless, his own ideas about continuity with traditional Judaism were highly selective, focused mainly on "prophetic morality," and the ideas of other early Zionist writers were more selective still. The young Joseph Klausner, for example, insisted that "Zionism is a highly radical Jewish movement . . . it aspires to a total revolution in Jewish life . . ."⁸ A total revolution: there was little in Jewish life and culture that would be spared by these Jewish liberators. Isaiah Berlin's essay on Chaim Weizmann beautifully illustrates this paradoxical point. Weizmann was, Berlin says, at one with his people: "his language was theirs, and their view of life was his." And yet he recognized this same people as "a semi-helot population, relegated to an inferior and dependent status, which produced in them the virtues and vices of slaves." And for this condition, Weizmann thought, "there was no remedy save a revolution—a total social transformation . . ."⁹ Men like Klausner and Weizmann would probably have agreed with Simon Bernfeld that "It is impossible to ensure the future of a nation by destroying its past."¹⁰ And yet, there was much that they wanted to destroy.

And replace it with what? Israel lived under gentile domination, and it was the culture of the dominant gentile nations that its liberators wanted to imitate. Theodore Herzl thought of the Jewish state as a bourgeois German republic. Weizmann admired modern science and parliamentary government and wanted the Jewish state, as Berlin writes, “to be a political child of English—almost exclusively English—experience” (which means, not of Jewish experience).¹¹ Other Zionist figures were central European social democrats, and still others were Nietzschean nationalists. Except for Herzl, they were all committed to Hebrew, the ancient language of the Jews, but their cultural commitments were modern and European. Even when, like Ahad Ha-am, they found inspiration in biblical Israel, they were not, in fact, building on the Jewish tradition. For the biblical heroes described in Zionist literature were the exact opposites of contemporary Jews: they were kings, warriors, and prophets—whereas the religion of exile, in Zionist eyes, produced political passivity and fearfulness, a slave mentality incapable of resistance or self-help.

There is nothing unusual in this admiration of the “gentiles.” Ahmed ben Bella, the first president of the Algerian republic, was a Francophile Marxist, who sat in a French prison reading Malraux and Sartre. The men who came together in 1885 to create the Indian National Congress were Anglophone and Anglophile lawyers, journalists, and officials. The architects of liberation have a lot in common with the architects of oppression. The first group has often gone to school with the second, which commonly claims to represent a more “advanced” culture—materially, intellectually, and of course militarily. Moses in Egypt is, again, the classic example, raised in the palace of the Pharaoh and certainly more at ease with the Egyptian elite than with the people he hoped to lead. The training of the national liberator in the home country and culture of the oppressor is a common theme in the history of national liberation. Nehru spent eight years in British schools (Harrow, Trinity College, Cambridge, and the Inns of Court) and, as a young man, was probably more conversant with the history and politics of Britain than with the history and politics of India. Late in his life, he told the American ambassador, John Kenneth Galbraith, that “I am the last Englishman to rule in India.”¹² Herzl was another entirely typical nationalist leader, with a very good Austrian education and no Jewish education at all, who knew far more about other nations than about his own, and who was at home with the idea of Jewish statehood because he was at home with people who already had a state. Often the leaders of the oppressed identify with an oppositional ideology in the imperial country—like the Marxism of some FLNers (or, another example, the communism of Ho Chi Minh, also learned in Paris) or the Fabian socialism of Nehru and the Indian National Congress (Winston Churchill was simply wrong when he called Nehru a communist) or, again, the East European social democracy of David Ben-Gurion and Mapai, the dominant party in the Zionist movement and then in Israel’s first three decades. But the fact that a doctrine was oppositional in, say, England, did not make it familiar in India. Here too the militants of national liberation are the carriers of ideas that are largely unknown to the people, or the greater number of the people, to whom they are carrying them. What can they say to those people?

They tell them that they are oppressed because they are backward, passive, mired in superstition and ignorance, led by men who are the accommodators-in-chief, the accomplices of oppression. The militants raise the hope of newness, as I have said, and give it body in one of the modernist ideologies, nationalist, liberal, socialist, or some combination of these three. They promise enlightenment, scientific knowledge, and material advance, but, perhaps more importantly, they promise victory over the oppressors and equal standing in the world. They appeal especially to the young (they are usually very young themselves), and often urge a radical break with family and friends and with all forms of established authority. They demand total commitment to the movement or, perhaps, a physical move to an all-encompassing community (like the Zionist kibbutz or a Gandhian ashram or village cooperative). The old ways must be repudiated and overcome—totally. But the old ways are cherished by many, probably by most, of the men and women whose ways they are. That is the paradox of liberation.

Still, the liberators do win; they lead a genuinely national struggle against the foreign rulers of their people. Indeed, the people themselves are far less sympathetic to the culture and politics of their rulers than the liberators are, and once a vanguard of militants has demonstrated that victory is possible, many men and women, who probably do not share the ideology of liberation, nonetheless join the struggle. The traditional political and religious leaders are pushed to the side, or they withdraw (passivity is their style), or they go along with the liberators, accepting a marginal role. The odd man out in this schematic story is Mahatma Gandhi, who succeeded in turning traditionalist passivity into a modern political weapon. There is no comparable figure in Zionist history or in or near the FLN—or in any other national-liberation movement that I know about. Even when he openly opposed Hindu beliefs and practices, Gandhi spoke to the people in a religious language that was foreign to the other leaders of the national-liberation movement. In 1934, for example, he suggested that an earthquake in Bihar was divine punishment for the sin of untouchability. Nehru, who certainly opposed untouchability, was shocked by this “staggering remark Anything more opposed to the scientific outlook,” he wrote, “would be difficult to imagine.” “On occasion,” reports B. R. Nanda, the founder and first director of the Nehru Memorial Library, “Gandhi appeared to Jawaharlal as ‘a medieval Catholic saint.’”¹³ The remark demonstrates the cultural references that guided Nehru’s political judgments (after all, a more local description of Gandhi was certainly possible). The two men managed to work together, but it was crucial to their cooperation that Gandhi conceded the political succession to the secularist and modernist Nehru.

Still, secularists and modernists blame Gandhi for the surprising strength of religious nationalism in liberated India. Thus V. S. Naipaul:

... the drama that is being played out in India today is the drama that [Gandhi] set up sixty years ago . . . Gandhi gave India its politics; he called up its archaic religious emotions. He made them serve one another, and brought about an awakening. But in independent India the elements of that awakening negate one another.

No government can survive on Gandhian fantasy; and . . . spirituality, the solace of a conquered people, which Gandhi turned into a form of national assertion, has soured more obviously into the nihilism that it always was.¹⁴

That was written in the late 1970s; leftist intellectuals in India these days are even more critical of the Gandhian legacy.

In Israel and Algeria, the transition from national liberation to religious revival was accomplished without the mediating role of a Gandhi figure—so perhaps Gandhi in India was less central than his critics believe; perhaps Hindutva would be a powerful presence in Indian politics even if he had never inspired and led the liberation movement. Still, the story is harder to tell without him or without anyone like him. I do not mean that other liberationist leaders were unwilling to speak in religious terms. Zionist writers could hardly help but invoke the sacred geography of the biblical texts; their hope for an “ingathering of the exiles” was a secularized version of a messianic promise. In Algeria, the FLN’s first magazine was called *El Moudjahid* (an embarrassment for Fanon, who told his readers that this phrase “originally” meant a Muslim holy warrior but now meant nothing more than a “fighter”).¹⁵ “It was the common tie of Islam under the pressure of colonial occupation,” writes John Dunn in his *Modern Revolutions*, “which united Arab and Kabyle [Berber] . . . in their rejection of the path of assimilation.”¹⁶ Algerian militants always insisted on their respect for Islam, banning the use of alcohol, for example, within the FLN. Still, neither the strategy and tactics nor the long-term political agenda of the militants was significantly influenced by their people’s religion. Even the Zionists aimed at a “normal” rather than a redemptive state. Gandhi remains a very large exception.

So, what happened? The traditionalists seemed to be defeated or marginalized; the aura of liberation did not attach to them; they had little influence in shaping the constitutional arrangements, the economy, or the educational system of the new states; they were hardly present in the new political elites. The story is a little more complicated in Algeria, where the radical left regime of Ben Bella lasted only three years. Houari Boumedienne, who overthrew and replaced Ben Bella in 1965, was certainly no Francophile. He had been educated in Muslim schools in Algeria and had studied for a year at El Azhar University in Cairo. But the political leaders he most admired were Castro and Tito; he ran a socialist economy, which had always been the promise of the FLN, and sustained a form of politics that, while socially conservative (on issues like the status of women), would appear to the next generation of Algerian Muslims as radically secular. How, then, was political Islam, how were the political versions of Hinduism and Judaism, reproduced or reinvented in the new world of liberation?

The story is different in each of my cases. But there are, again, common features. In all three countries, religion remained a force in everyday life during the years of liberation and its aftermath. Though some of the militants might have liked to mount a Bolshevik-style attack on the religious establishment, the new rulers did not dare do that; perhaps the Russian example was already a warning against a totalizing

secularism. In any case, they believed that decline was the destiny of all religions; what Nehru called “the scientific outlook” was bound to triumph; secularization did not require radical coercion since it was an inevitable historical tendency. “Some Hindus dream of going back to the Vedas,” Nehru wrote in *The Discovery of India*, “some Muslims dream of an Islamic theocracy. Idle fancies, for there is no going back to the past There is only one-way traffic in Time.”¹⁷ Well, that is more or less what we all believed in those years—or what almost all of us believed: Clifford Geertz thought otherwise. Writing about religion in Bali, in newly liberated Indonesia, in the early 1960s, he argued that religious belief might be swamped by “modern materialist ideas,” but probably not. For “such overall drifts—when they do not turn out to be mirages altogether—often pass over deeply rooted cultural configurations with rather less effect upon them than we would have thought possible.” He went further, suggesting that “today in Bali some of the same social and intellectual processes that gave rise to the fundamental religious transformations of world history seem to be at least well begun. . . .”¹⁸ In other places too, the drift, or perhaps we should call it the storm, of national liberation passed over ancient societies and reborn nations with “rather less effect” than the movements’ militants expected, and the processes that would eventually lead to religious revival were already begun, under the eyes of the militants but out of their sight.

The old ways were sustained in temples, synagogues, and mosques, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in families, in personal relations, in life-cycle celebrations, where the sustaining behaviors were hardly visible to secular militants busily at work on the big projects of modernization. Indeed, the coming revivals were fueled by the resentment that ordinary people, pursuing their customary ways, felt toward those secularizing and modernizing elites, with their foreign ideas, their patronizing attitudes, and their big projects. They were fueled even more by the authoritarian or paternalist politics that was forced upon the new elites in their war against the customary ways. The authoritarianism of the Algerian state was particularly brutal; indeed, the internal politics of the FLN, before liberation, was already murderous, reflecting deep tensions between Arabs and Berbers as well as between Francophile revolutionaries and more locally based militants. By contrast, the Indian National Congress and the Labor Zionists were committed to democracy and mostly managed their internal tensions in nonviolent ways. But even the leaders of these movements, once they were in power, operated with a sure sense that they knew what was best for their backward and often recalcitrant peoples.

And then the backwardness came back. Not in its old form but, as I have already suggested, in militant, ideological, and politicized forms—modern even in its anti-modernism. Its protagonists claim to embody the religious tradition, the faith of the ancestors, even to represent a pure, authentic version of it; oldness is their mantra. And even though the claim is false, the sense of oldness must account, at least in part, for the appeal of their program. They connect the liberated people to their own past; they provide a sense of belonging and stability in a world rapidly changing. And with the old imperial oppressors gone, they also provide a recognizable, even a familiar,

“other” as an object of fear or hate—someone to blame for all that has gone wrong since the day of liberation. Sometimes the “others” are members of a rival religion; sometimes they are leftists, secularists, heretics, and infidels—“traitors,” it is said, “in our midst.”

But what happened to the Indian, the Israeli, and the Algerian newness? Where are the new men and women, each the equal of the others, standing straight, tall, and smart? I am not sure how to answer that question. There are, of course, a lot of people like that, but not as many as the liberationists expected. It appears that the culture of liberation was too thin to sustain these people and enable them to reproduce themselves; the radical rejection of the past left, as it were, too little material for cultural construction. The liberators did generate a set of holidays, a set of heroes, a set of commemorative rituals; they made up songs and dances; they wrote novels and poems. And for a while, at least, enough people seemed to engage with all these so that it was almost possible to believe in the new beginning. But it was too artificial, too recently constructed, and after a couple of generations the heroes lost their aura, the commemorations their charm; young people began to drift away, moving toward the excitements of global pop culture or toward the fervency of religious revival. The attraction of pop culture is no doubt a disappointment to the aging militants of national liberation, but their biggest disappointment, their biggest surprise, is the large number of young men and women who are drawn to the ideologies of Hindutva, messianic Zionism, and radical Islam. And are they not right to be surprised? Is it not in fact unbelievable, for example, that so many daughters of the women whose “entry into history” Fanon famously announced and whose “self-uprooting” he celebrated are willingly withdrawing from politics and re-rooting themselves, returning to religious faiths that are—at least to this secular eye—as misogynist as ever?¹⁹

I suppose it is not unbelievable; it is just the sort of thing social science claims to be able to explain or, at least, to understand. Marxist writers, who are committed to scientific explanation, search for the social class whose material interests religious revivalism might serve. A recent study of “left discourses in contemporary India” finds the rise of Hindutva attributed by different writers to the petty bourgeoisie (the classic Marxist candidate) and also to the rich peasants, the poor peasants, the lumpen proletariat, the urban workers, and the new capitalists. I have some sympathy with a despairing comment it quotes that appeared in the leftist magazine *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1993: “Whatever the analytical difficulties of reducing an ideology to its material base, unless one posits . . . such an epistemological relation, one will be left with a politically debilitating agnosticism.” But the reduction does not seem to work or, at least, it needs more work. Two years later, the same writer in the same magazine wrote that Hindutva was not only “an instrumentality protecting a material interest . . . Over and above that, it is a set of values, attitudes, and norms of behavior that can only be countered with the aid of alternative values and norms.”²⁰

That seems to me the beginning of understanding. I would not give up on the search for a material base; still, it is necessary to acknowledge the staying power of the old culture and religion up and down the social hierarchy and the impossibility

of producing, *ex nihilo*, a set of alternative values and norms. But perhaps the militants of national liberation, like all revolutionaries, had to insist on radical cultural negation and then on radical newness. Perhaps that is the essential character of their project. Years ago, when I was writing about the Puritan revolution in England, I came upon a sermon preached in the House of Commons in 1643 that expresses a sentiment common to revolutionaries everywhere: “Take heed of building upon an old frame,” the preacher told the MPs, “that must be all plucked down to the ground. Take heed of plastering when you should be pulling down.”²¹ But maybe such a radical “pulling down” just does not have enough appeal to the people living in the house; they are too attached to it, even if they complain about its discomforts. Maybe what is necessary is only a partial demolition and a renovation of the rest.

There actually were intellectuals in the national-liberation movements who aimed at a critical engagement with the old culture rather than a totalizing attack upon it. Those are the people with whom I most sympathize; I like to think that, had they won out, the story might have turned out differently. The liberators might have made their peace with at least some part of their nation’s past, fashioned a set of beliefs and practices that were new, indeed, but also familiar, and thereby avoided the extremism of religious revival. Maybe. Some commentators argue that this was never possible and then place their hopes in the dialectic: first comes the politics of radical secularist rejection, then the politics of militant religious reaffirmation, and then, as the OED says, “the contradictions merge . . . in a higher truth that comprehends them both.” But the dialectic does not seem to be working these days the way it used to. I do not see many signs of the coming synthesis. In India, Israel, and Algeria—and probably in other places too—the struggle that the liberators thought they had won still has to be won. It can be won, I believe, but it is going to continue for a long time, and the outcome is far less certain than the militants of national liberation believed. Like the ancient Israelites, the militants thought they had reached the Promised Land and then discovered that they had carried Egypt in their baggage.

Notes

- [1] For a Jewish example, see Kook, *Orot*, 96.
- [2] Gershom Scholem provides the classic account of Jewish messianism as a form of accommodation in his *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, chap. 1.
- [3] Naipaul, *India*, 43.
- [4] Fanon, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, 30, 32.
- [5] The slogan originates with Moses Sofer, one of the leading Orthodox rabbis of the nineteenth century.
- [6] Pinsker, *Road to Freedom*, 76.
- [7] Almog, *Zionism and History*, 121; Luz, *Parallels Meet*, 88.
- [8] *Ibid.*, 270.
- [9] Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, 42–44.
- [10] Almog, *Zionism and History*, 132.
- [11] Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, 55.

- [12] Nanda, *Jawaharlal Nehru*, 263.
 [13] *Ibid.*, 32.
 [14] Naipaul, *India*, 159.
 [15] Fanon, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, 160 n.
 [16] Dunn, *Modern Revolutions*, 161.
 [17] Quoted in Chankhoke, *Beyond Secularism*, 52.
 [18] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 189.
 [19] Fanon, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, 107, 109; On “self-uprooting” I have followed the (better) translation in Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, 402.
 [20] Vijay, *Writing Politics*, chap. 4; the quotes are from 157 and 158.
 [21] Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints*, 177.

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