

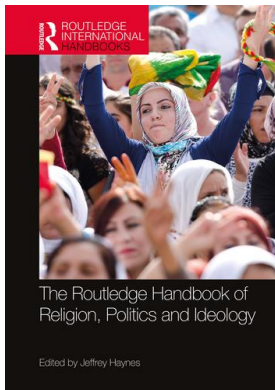
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## The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Politics and Ideology

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### Liberal religion

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## 1

## LIBERAL RELIGION

*Emanuel de Kadt***Introduction**

The relationship between religion and ideology deals, above all, with the effects of religion on society and politics. This will be one of the issues I shall deal with in this chapter. A first *caveat*: though I will be referring, below, to liberal religious *people*, this piece deals above all with liberal *religion*. In doing so, it presents those liberal versions of different religions as coherent wholes. Yet what their adherents (liberal religious *people*) make of those views is another matter: many of them will not follow the code book, stock and barrel, but will pick and choose what to respect. Another qualification: insofar as I shall be dealing with society and politics, my focus is not on ‘liberal *politics*’, but on religiously liberal people in such societies; in discussions, these different approaches to liberalism are often not clearly kept apart.<sup>1</sup> I have dealt at length with liberal religion in my book of the same name (de Kadt 2018), and I will try not to repeat myself here. Even so, some overlap is inevitable.

My focus will be on the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>2</sup> The liberal versions of these religions are not a recent phenomenon: they have existed as reactions and counterparts to traditional varieties for many decades – no, for centuries. In fact, we can find the earliest reformers, the earliest religious thinkers to open a ‘liberal’ perspective, as far back as the 17th century. They challenged at least some of the accepted tenets of traditional versions, tenets that were felt to be particularly difficult for contemporary people. Such challenges have continued over time.

Distinctive to the early 21st century – in contrast to what might have been expected according to the widespread ideas about the ‘decline of religion’ – is the strengthening, in all three Abrahamic religions, of *non-liberal* versions, and notably of fundamentalist varieties. Jewish fundamentalists, specifically in Israel, have had substantial influence: official policy towards the Palestinians has been deeply affected by their Judaic superiority complex. Much attention has been paid to versions of Islamic fundamentalism, partly because of their aggressive, often violent, stance towards other religions. Within Christianity, the world-wide growth of Pentecostalism as a reaction to earlier theological liberalism has been widely remarked upon.<sup>3</sup> But there have also been reactions *within* the traditional churches: Richard Cimino describes the Biblical Witness Fellowship as a grassroots Protestant renewal – but renewal, here, away from liberalism and back towards traditional Protestant viewpoints (2001).

All this is likely to have influenced how liberal religion presents the ‘counter-argument’ to this upsurge in fundamentalist views. It would be interesting to know whether liberal religion has grown in response to this ‘turn to the right’ or whether it has been ‘squeezed’. Such an exercise can be attempted for individual countries, where country statistics are available. Yet even there, it would remain a hazardous enterprise, as statistics are not organized according to a scale from ‘liberalism’ to ‘fundamentalism’, nor do they show to what extent different religious congregations may be shifting towards one or the other. What tends to emerge in many countries is an increase in those who declare themselves *without* religion. By way of example, figures for The Netherlands from 2010 to 2018 show growth in those declaring themselves to be without religion from 45% to 53%, a fall in Roman Catholics from 27% to 22%, and basically steady figures for other denominations, including Islam.<sup>4</sup> As some of those other denominations can be regarded as being towards the non-liberal side of the spectrum, this does suggest that – at least in one specific country – there is no clear shift either towards the liberal or the non-liberal side.

Most forms of liberal religion share a focus on the here and now, on inner-worldly issues, on the world we live in rather than on the hereafter – issues such as civil rights, racism, women’s reproductive freedom, gay rights, stopping nuclear proliferation or the environmental crisis (Parker 2010). Yet, it is essential to remember that the origins of these contemporary views lie in the 19th century or even earlier. The liberal religion we speak of today is not a recent, or a merely modern-day, phenomenon. More on this shortly.

In the American Protestant churches, such a here-and-now approach has been called Social Gospel Christianity. Side by side with the Social Gospel Christians, we find the Universalists, who are above all concerned with ‘getting along’ with each other and with others. Again, it is the here and now that is the focus: when love prevails, Heaven on earth is thought to be achievable. The Universalists oppose the ‘ultimate division of the saved and the damned’ (ibid:10). Parker, a professor of theology, states: ‘We come to know this world as paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth (ibid:16). A similar note is struck by John Buehrens in the same volume: ‘Progressive eschatology has the courage to hope for justice, peace, and sustainability in *this* world. The one we have been given’ (2010:22). Since its emergence within the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s, Liberation Theology, and the adoption of its main principles in many other religions, has focused on the experiences of those who are poor, oppressed and marginalized (Gutierrez 1973).

Traditional religious communities – as opposed to liberal ones – can be seriously oppressive, often by holding out the threat of hell for those who do not conform. As a result, people can develop significant misgivings about organized religion, especially if they have no experience of a more liberal variety. Yet, religious communities can also be ‘communities of resistance’ in unjust dominant cultures, resistance that is rarely effective when attempted by individuals on their own.

Good religious communities convert people to the way of life our society needs to move to: from believing that violence is redemptive to practicing justice and compassion; from going it alone to giving and receiving care from others; from isolating oneself in individualism to sharing work on behalf of the common good.

(Parker 2010:45)

I have no intention, here, of going at length into the historical background of liberal religion, yet a few main points need to be made. The original impulse for liberal religion came from the Protestant side. ‘Modernizers’ in the Catholic Church and within Judaism basically followed their lead, though often without acknowledging this. A significant contributing factor was the

rise of biblical criticism in the 19th century: it led to texts, hitherto regarded as sacred, being examined 'objectively'. All reformist approaches wanted to adapt to the modern world and fully take account of the findings of science; they believed tradition to be something that develops, and they accepted that there was a core to the belief system that should remain untouched and a layer on the fringes, so to speak, that could change. Yet the details here could well be challenged, and issues can and did arise as to how such issues should be settled and by whom. 'Modernizers' in religion are fissiparous: modernist congregations tend to split. This is especially so among Protestant liberals. I am not just referring to *people* with modernist or liberal views but to modernist *congregations*. Such separate, 'different' congregations exist among Protestants and Jews, and to a more limited extent in the Roman Catholic Church; they are considerably more difficult to identify as between different mosques. Yes, there are mosques whose Imams have a more liberal approach to Islam, but while among Jews and Protestants, these liberal approaches crystallized out into separate, progressive *movements*, and to a more limited extent also among Roman Catholics (especially in the USA, as will be shown below), in Islam, no such crystallization took place.

Another issue that needs to be mentioned is the way in which *identity* has come to be increasingly intertwined with religion. Especially for immigrants, notably those in Western Europe from Islamic countries, religion has taken on greater importance in how they understand themselves (how they experience their identity) and how they are seen by others. In contrast, religion is likely to be less prominent in the identity of liberals: after all, they have replaced aspects of the traditional and more assertive religious views ('we know') with more open-minded and questioning approaches. Liberals are what they are in part because religion plays a less constraining part in their identity make-up and in the way they run their daily lives, as compared to the more traditional believers. Even so, the four dimensions of identity construction, pinpointed by Hervieu-Léger (1999), remain important to liberals. These are (1) *communitarian*: the distinguishing social and symbolic markers, such as circumcision or practising the five pillars of Islam; (2) *ethical*: the acceptance of values related to the religious tradition; (3) *cultural*: doctrine, books, art within the tradition; (4) *emotional*: the feelings that accompany identity.

I have already suggested that there is much variation in the extent to which people who profess to be of a particular religious persuasion actually follow its directives. In any religious community, there will be those who try to 'live by the book', but others will be more easy-going about the extent to which they follow all the prescriptions and prohibitions. This is also the case for those who belong to liberal congregations: their members can be on quite a range of 'correctness' on matters such as weekly presence in church or synagogue or the following of dietary restrictions (e.g., many Jews do not eat pork, but are much less concerned about keeping the many other dietary rules – which is true, incidentally, also for many who are members of more traditional congregations). Yet as Frank Opton (1982), a leader of the Unitarian Church in the USA, has emphasized, whatever the actual behaviour of their members, liberal varieties of religion shun indifference and do not promote what might be called 'religion lite'. They can differ considerably from each other, even within the same religious family, but they take religion seriously and want to be seen to take it seriously.

Let us now consider in more detail the liberal approaches in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. I shall begin with Protestantism because it was among Protestants that liberal ideas first took hold.

### Liberal Protestantism

It is, of course, problematic to speak of 'Protestantism' in this context because of the many varieties of Protestantism, also among liberals. Yes, there are some aspects that are shared by all: their

opposition to seeing good deeds as helping to lead to salvation, thought to be only attainable through faith (*sola fides*); the reluctance to focus on ‘the sacred’; and the widely shared mistrust of powerful Church institutions – all developed in the original ‘stand-off’ from Roman Catholicism. Yet there are considerable differences between the diverse denominations, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals: some of these are liberal, some are fundamentalist, and many are in between, or with a more or less formal *range* of views. Remember also that the very concept of fundamentalism comes from the Protestant sphere. The contrasts between the extremes are stark.

The roots of liberal Protestantism go back to the 16th century and the followers of Jacobus Arminius in The Netherlands (Klooster 2006). One of the main issues they had with the dominant Calvinists, an issue which reverberates with liberal Protestants today, related to the formers’ view that only the ‘elect’ are saved. Whether you were among those or not was not something you could influence: it was simply an unknowable given. In contrast, the Arminians called the *Remonstrants* in The Netherlands insisted that salvation solely depended upon a person’s faith or lack of it; if you had faith, you could/would be saved. They were influential outside The Netherlands, notably through John Wesley in the UK, the founder of the Methodist movement. Of importance were also the ideas of tolerance regarding belief (different variants should be able to exist side by side within the same Church) and of freedom of conscience: the Arminians opposed the ‘imposition’ of specific beliefs.

In the 19th century, liberal Protestants had to come to terms with the new insights in science, notably the theory of evolution, and face up to the consequences of raw capitalism. Important figures straddling the 19th and 20th centuries were Walter Rauschenberg (1861–1918) in the USA and Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) in Germany. They stressed that theology should be just as open to criticism as other branches of learning and that Christianity needed to be understood in the context of other historical religions. They also focused on the contemporary socio-economic reality, with its dominant materialism and glorification of power (‘might is right’), which had led to widespread poverty and exclusion. This was seen as a social evil, even as a sin. In general, liberal religious views have tended to go together with progressive approaches to the social and economic order, with human rights and tolerance – but not tolerance for social injustice or discrimination – very much up-front (Muray 2008; Chapman 2001).

Some issues are salient in the liberal Protestant view. There is hesitancy about the portrayal of God, on the whole *not* seen as a being ‘out there’, let alone ‘up there’. God is seen as immanent rather than transcendent, and humans can only ‘understand’ God through their critical questions. Miracles and literalist interpretations of the Bible are rejected. The Bible has to be approached with respect, but also as a historical document. Much of what characterizes liberals is what they do *not* believe: that Jesus walked on water, that Christ was literally resurrected, that Mary gave birth as a virgin, that Christianity is the only religion that brings salvation. Protestant liberals hold that the notion of God has evolved over time and that it continues to evolve. A good example is Anglican Bishop John Robinson, who interpreted God as the ground of our being (Robinson 1963). The Bible is regarded as a time-bound document with its own internal contradictions, which needs interpretation in the light of contemporary concerns. While traditionalists have looked forward to the time that God will solve the problems of the world, liberals do not believe in such intervention: it is up to people to make the best of life on earth. Liberal Protestantism is not a clearly demarcated movement, though the different elements all tend to pull away from authority, stressing instead the autonomy of the spirit and the centrality of *questions* rather than *answers* (Klooster 2006).

As for the organization of congregations, liberal Protestants insist on the avoidance of top-down authority: preachers should not raise their finger and tell congregants what to do. Rather

they should help them to see how each can lead her or his own life according to scripture. There may be circumstances when the Church can, and should, provide moral leadership – an example may be how to behave towards recent immigrants – but overall, people should be left to come to their own moral conclusions. Reaching such conclusions can be helped along with the discussions in church community groups. Historically, Protestant churches have been patriarchal, and among Protestant communities (even among the non-liberal), there have been various forms of feminist reaction. At the very least, that historical patriarchy is rejected; as one travels along the traditional-liberal continuum towards the liberal end, there is also the rejection of ‘compulsory’ heterosexuality.

All of this is starkly different from the beliefs of those at the other extreme of the Protestant spectrum, the Evangelicals, for whom revelation rather than human experience characterizes ‘true religion’, and whose preachers do, or so they appear to believe, have all the answers.

Protestants have long sought to spread their religion overseas (notably in Africa) by missionary work, with the missions often having a medical component to make them attractive to people. Yet as Pamela Klassen (2011) has noted, among liberal Protestants in the USA, there has in recent times been a reaction to those medical missions, whatever their historical importance. They have come to be seen as aspects of colonialism and Christian triumphalism – ‘an imperialist virus, unfaithful to the teachings of Jesus and inadequate to the challenge of transforming toxic structures of power’ (ibid:13). Yet ‘healing’, seen as a manifestation of love, has remained important for liberal Protestants. They ‘moved from medical evangelizers to holistic contemplatives, taking on practices such as yoga and Reiki, a Japanese, energy-based form of healing touch. Their medical missions are no longer rooted in eager evangelism but in a desire for “cross-cultural experience”’ (ibid:12). Liberal Protestants were also ‘in the vanguard of a sexual revolution in which the literal “pathologizing” of homosexuality was transformed into a political and religious movement for the celebration of sexual difference’ (ibid:18). And, not surprisingly, in the later 20th century, a strong feminist element became part and parcel of liberal Protestantism. Clearly, it has a significant socio-cultural component. As we shall see, it is not alone in promoting such a blend of the religious and the secular.

So, Protestants have been liberal pioneers. Many of their innovations have also been taken up by liberals in other religious congregations.

### **The Roman Catholic Church and liberal religious views**

The first ‘reformers’ within the Roman Catholic Church emerged in the late 18th century, with priests such as Josef Eybel in Austria-Hungary or Abbé Gregoire in France. Their reforming ideas were influenced by those of the French Revolution and enough to make them suspect once the political reaction set in. That political reaction came to be known as the counter-Enlightenment, re-affirming the unquestionable and unquestioned role of the pope as the infallible primate. A number of deeply conservative encyclicals were issued, which eroded the idea that the pope was to act *with* the bishops. Those encyclicals squarely rejected independent critique of scripture, which was being promoted by some (quite isolated) ‘modernists’ in the Church, by priests such as Alfred Loisy. Pope Pius X (1903–1914) was particularly angered by their modernist ideas.

Pope Pius XI (1922–1939) was more open to certain liberal views, stood up strongly to the Nazis, went along with a shift towards spirituality, accepted the idea of the People of God and supported Catholic Action, a lay movement with separate branches for workers, university students and others. These developments weren’t ‘liberal’ as such, yet they helped make the idea acceptable that ‘issues’ could be discussed. In France, the movement *Nouvelle Théologie* was at first driven by Dominican monks, later by the Jesuits. It encountered opposition in Rome; Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) insisted that theologians should only transmit the Church’s official and

accepted views, not give their own interpretations. The great palaeontologist and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), who helped the Church face up to scientific facts, was originally also given a hard time because of his views. Yet eventually, renewal also came to the Roman Catholic Church, most prominently through the efforts of Pope John XXIII (1958–1963) and the Second Vatican Council, convened by him. Notably, there was the fact that the Council was allowed to set its own agenda. Pope John's encyclicals, *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963) were trail-blazers in the socio-economic sphere and dealt specifically with the issue of underdevelopment, which had moved increasingly into the limelight. Pope John also allowed the discussion about doctrine to reopen, and he reversed the isolation of the proponents of the *Nouvelle Théologie*. The role of the laity as the *People of God* went some way towards softening the previously unalloyed hierarchical structure. The current pope, Francis, is – despite considerable opposition from within the Vatican – manifestly a liberal and innovator.

An important area of that innovation has been the slow opening up to the idea that priests should be allowed to marry, for which there is increasing pressure from within the Church. Married Anglican priests have been allowed to move over to the Roman Catholic Church, while married men can act as priests in remote regions such as the Amazon. These developments have no doubt been reinforced by the sorry saga of paedophilia. These are as yet limited steps, but they suggest a deeper change may eventually occur, in spite of the opposition of non-liberal elements among the hierarchy.

Since the mid-1970s, there has been a specific liberal reform group among American Roman Catholics called *Call to Action* (CTA). According to Cimino (2001), at the beginning of the millennium, it had some 20,000 members, of which around two-thirds were laity and one-third religious (most of these are said to be nuns).<sup>5</sup> CTA members have been locked out of parish buildings, and some have even been excommunicated by their bishops. The movement had developed following a consultation called by the American bishops collectively. Over 800,000 responses were received after parish gatherings had formulated answers to the question as to what was most important in their lives as Catholics. Those responses focused on the desire for changes in the Church's approach to issues such as birth control, clerical celibacy, capital punishment and economic justice. In Chicago, the 'local association of liberal Catholics moved toward a national expression after Catholic activists attended a 1987 Vatican synod on the role of the laity and realized that they would not have much of a role unless they started organizing' (ibid:125). Their liberal views on theological matters went together with their progressive perspectives on socio-economic issues, human rights and democracy; like Liberation Theology, they made the link between social justice and salvation explicit. CTA saw itself as 'carrying out the unfinished agenda of the [Vatican] council' (ibid:139).

CTA organized annual conferences, which focused on reform and renewal in the Roman Catholic Church, dealing with matters such as the role of women in the Church. However, there was a widespread sense that you couldn't have much influence to bring about change in the Church; this led to considerable frustration. Cimino gives much detail derived from interviews. One good example is his discussion of Corpus Christi Parish in Rochester, NY.

Women were invited to the altar to consecrate the Eucharist; the unions of gays and lesbians were publicly blessed; and non-Catholics were openly invited to receive communion. In short, the parish was imbued with the liberal reform spirit that drives CTA and the host of other progressive groups in American Catholicism. The priest, Father James Callan, was not only pushing the envelope on contentious issues in the Church but also building one of the most influential parishes in the city.

(ibid:135)

Eventually, his bishop excommunicated Callan when he didn't stop his 'unorthodox practices' (ibid:135). A few months later, Callan returned and started his own parish as an independent Church, Spiritus Christi.<sup>6</sup> All this led to serious divisions – there were many who believed you should continue *in* the Church, and try to reform it from within. The exclusion of CTA from the Roman Catholic (RC) mainstream accelerated since the appointment of more conservative bishops, notably by Pope John Paul II (1978–2005). Pope Francis, as we shall see, has to an extent reversed this trend.

A few words need to be said on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement, as it is seen by many in the RC Church as part of a 'renewal'. And a renewal it is indeed: from the late 1960s, it 'generated a more personalized and informal style of faith that spilled out from the prayer groups and large charismatic conventions to have a significant impact on the contemporary church' (Cimino 2001:14). Among charismatic groups, the role of priests, and that of ritual, is seen as less important than in the mainstream; people often meet in private homes. They see similarities between themselves and Pentecostals, and 'speaking in tongues' occurs among them. They regard their approach as a throwback to the 'miraculous and communitarian character of the early church' (ibid:16). After initial hesitancy, the hierarchy broadly approved of the movement, and Pope John Paul II was a 'fan'. That confirms that the movement, though a 'renewal', does *not* represent an opening towards liberalism: its position is firmly on the side of tradition. It is best seen as a 'sideshow' to the mainstream Church.<sup>7</sup>

More broadly, the RC Church has persisted as an organization in which hierarchy remains dominant and the pope's role central. This has not remained unchallenged: as long ago as the early 18th century, the Old Catholics separated from the RCs, with the former (still an active religious movement in The Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe<sup>8</sup>) objecting specifically to the concept of papal infallibility. That has been one of the main issues that have led to the formation of 'non-Roman' Catholic congregations. Many of these continue to operate, especially in the USA, even though they are not particularly visible internationally. Other major non-Roman Catholics are the Anglicans and the Orthodox.

Julie Byrne (2016) has focused on these 'other Catholics' (a label already used in the US Census of 1890!), a motley collection of congregations, some of which are in fact *more* traditionalist than the mainstream RC Church. Even so, it is a label that mainly covers 'left-leaning', liberal congregations. Byrne recognizes that these independent Catholics are few in number – possibly no more than 1 million in the USA, compared to some 64 million RCs. Yet today, 'many left-leaning independents not only ordain women, but also perform same-sex marriages, open communion to all, and allow multiple religious affiliations, among other surprising things' (ibid:4). Since Vatican II, Rome has become less intolerant of them, even considering them as part of the *ecumene*. Byrne's research has focused on the Church of Antioch, founded in 1959 by the Dutch-born Californian Herman Spruit, who included women in the ministry from the start and whose partner, Meri Spruit, succeeded him as presiding bishop. Byrne notes that many of the 'Antioch-connected churches are liberal, eclectic, and metaphysical. But other offspring lean right, because Herman made friends on the conservative side as well' (ibid:13). And she observes:

Many Roman Catholics believe that women should be priests, but some independents *are* women priests. Many Roman Catholics accept other religious truths, but some independents hail the Buddha at mass. Many Roman Catholics question bishops' decisions, but independents question the idea that Catholicism is only real if your bishops are Vatican-approved.

(ibid: 19)



The Church of Antioch split in 2010; in this respect, it was no different from many independent churches, notably among Protestants. But most of the independent Catholics, though they modify Catholicism in a number of ways, do ‘keep succession, sacraments, and saints, as well as identification with the word “Catholic” ... Left-leaning independent Catholics showcase conciliarism, liberalism, and modernism. They precociously consecrated black men, ordained women, and married gay people. They dropped sin and universalized salvation’ (ibid:291). Vatican II accepted some of these views to a limited extent, but it is worth remembering that Benedict XVI (2005–2013) called women’s ordination a ‘grave crime’. Yet, it cannot be doubted that world-wide, RCs have wanted increased participation in Church governance. The independent Catholics have provided that.

### Jewish approaches to liberalism

In most countries, liberalism among Jewish congregations has taken two forms – a moderate one, called reform in the UK and conservative in the USA, and a more ‘radical’ version, called respectively liberal/progressive in the UK and reform in the USA. There, another non-Orthodox movement is that of the Reconstructionists, who see Judaism as a civilization rather than as a revealed religion. The antecedents of Jewish liberalism do not go back as far as those in the RC Church, let alone among the Protestant liberals. Jewish liberalism was given its earliest, though incomplete, impulse in the late 18th century through the work of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) – incomplete because Mendelssohn remained a member of his Orthodox congregation and accepted many aspects of its belief system that have come under criticism from liberal congregations in more recent times. It was the French Revolution and its incorporation of the Jews as full French citizens that changed the situation dramatically, most clearly among the Jews of Germany, where the first explicitly liberal synagogue was founded early in the 19th century. When others followed, they bundled together as the *Reform Tempel Verein*, whose congregations accepted the historical approach to Judaism of the followers of the so-called *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. They wanted to see traditions adapted to the contemporary world and regarded the Prophets, and their universalist ethical teaching and emphasis on social justice, as more important than the ever-so-detailed prescriptions and prohibitions found in the Talmud, in the Mishnah and even in the Torah. These were regarded as hindrances to the full incorporation of Jews in the surrounding nation.

An important figure in the crystallization of a liberal Jewish world-view was Abraham Geiger (1810–1874). As Koltun–Fromm (2006) notes, for Geiger the issue of the personal *meaning* of religion for the believer was fundamental, and this needed to be explored in an engagement with ‘modernity’. When commandments have lost their force and have become ‘dead letters’, keeping them was regarded as showing a lack of personal integrity. Geiger’s liberalism went only so far – he notably regarded women as belonging in the private, household sphere and accepted the patriarchal conceptions of traditional Judaism – a far cry from liberal Judaism today, which strongly emphasizes the equality of women and men. Koltun–Fromm’s interpretation is clear: ‘The liberal’s search for religious authority is rooted not in fact but in meaning, not in history but in memory, not in the past as such but in an ethical presence that bridges that past with contemporary moral aspirations’ (ibid:39). And as he notes later, history is a source of *personal* meaning, not ‘the truth’, but personal meaning within a *communal* framework.

Today, after abandoning the more extreme approaches that were at times adopted in the early years – in some places services were even held on Sunday rather than on Saturday – liberal Judaism continues to stress that laws, originally formulated more than 2000 years ago, need to be reconsidered in the light of contemporary reality and that people should above all be

concerned with the *spirit* rather than the *letter* of those laws. Similarly, the religious services and rituals of the synagogue have been ‘updated’. Although in the liturgy, God continues to be mentioned in ways that echo traditional formulations, which rather jars with people’s beliefs in this context, liberal Jewish leaders will voice uncertainty about the very idea of God (and not just because of the question ‘where was God during the Holocaust’), while the liberalism in religion crosses over into socio-political liberalism, notably in relation to Israel and the Palestinians (Sarah 2012).

This fits broadly with the ideas of the American movement *Jewish Renewal*, as depicted by Richard Cimino (2001). Jewish ‘Renewalists’ were concerned about the disaffection of young people, and they initiated a range of innovations meant to be attractive to them, notably the *havurah* movement, from the Hebrew word for ‘fellowship’. This argued that you didn’t need rabbis or cantors for a meaningful service: laypersons could gather in homes to discuss how Judaism was relevant to everyday life. (Echoes, here, of the CTA movement among Catholics.) Relevance was considered the mainstay in this return to a more holistic Judaism, and it revived the interest in mysticism that had been central for the *Hasidim*. It spilled over into community action, with emphasis on activities under the heading of *tikkun olam* (repair the world). Two rabbis were of particular importance to Jewish Renewal: Rabbi Zalman Schachter and Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.

For the Renewalists, spiritual traditions were at the core – also non-Jewish ones. This was different

from the modernizing of tradition that Reform Judaism sought. The modernist approach was ‘editing halakhah [Jewish law] on the basis of personal preference’. In its place, Schachter proposed a ‘psycho-halakhic process’, which says that ‘everything we have done in halakhah is important but we have to ask, What function did it fulfil in an earlier time and what’s the best way to fulfil that function in our current situation?’  
(*ibid*:151)

Equality became a central theme – notably that between women and men – and broad lay participation in services was seen as essential. Renewalists accept women, gays and lesbians on equal terms, while in traditional synagogues, ten *men* are required to provide the *minyan* (the number of people needed to hold a service); among the Renewal synagogues it is ten *persons*. The old, basically patriarchal, prayers were replaced by new texts that stressed inclusivity and equality, using gender-neutral language – a change that also occurred among the liberal movement in the UK. Spirituality, community life and social action were given prominence. Cimino gives various examples, such as:

Rabbi Jonathan, leader of a prominent New York synagogue, has gradually integrated many renewal practices into his congregation: meditation classes are offered weekly, and healing services are held regularly. The contemplative dimension of Judaism is found in the synagogue’s prayerful Sabbath services, punctuated with long periods of silence, as well as in the music by popular renewal composers.

(*ibid*:164)

Most of the Renewal adherents interviewed by Cimino do not want the movement to become another ‘branch’ of Judaism, side by side with the Orthodox, Conservatives, Reform and Reconstructionists. But there is a division among them ‘between those who see the movement as representing a new brand of Judaism and others who see the renewal as exactly that

– a revitalization of existing Jewish institutions and theology’ (ibid:169). How the latter option would play out remains an open question.

### **Liberal Islam?**

Nader Hashemi wrote:

The political analysis of my left-of-center friends was particularly unhelpful in understanding the complicated politics of Muslim societies where today religion is a key marker of identity, secularism has few supporters, and social movements whose participants self-identify with Islam are gaining in popularity and are important players in emerging social and political debates.

(2009:x)

He may have been talking about politics, but the quote hardly suggests that there is likely to be much space for a liberal version of Islam. He later argues that, in contrast to Western societies, modernization in Islamic ones has meant ‘dictatorship, repression and corruption – in short social injustice’ (ibid:133). As we have seen among liberal Protestants, Catholics and Jews, social justice is at the very heart of their conception of liberal religion; here could be a first important difference, especially as religion continues to be ‘a key marker of identity in Muslim societies’ (ibid:135). In this context, the modernizing efforts in Iran of Shah Reza Khan and his son Mohammed Pahlavi affected the clergy especially, as their powers in the fields of law and education were reduced substantially – a useful reminder in the context of the enormous increase in those powers, there, after the Islamic revolution.

Hashemi argues that the more the West rejected traditional Islamic practices (e.g., corporal/capital punishments), the more Muslims have seen these as central to Islam. Khomeini (and his successor Khamenei) specifically regarded the idea of the separation of religion and politics as imperialist. Secularism – a portal to liberal religion? – is interpreted very negatively, both among Shi’a and Sunni Muslims, and is in fact regarded as the equivalent of atheism.

Hashemi rightly notes that in the West, religious reformation preceded secularization. His view that in the Muslim world, it has been the reverse is a more dubious proposition: what religious reformation, one must ask? Yes, there has been modernization of *society* in various Muslim majority countries – for example, in the judiciary and the educational system – but there are no significant examples of changes in the religious arena. In fact, as Hashemi himself observes:

a significant portion of Muslim society today is responsive to political appeals that call for the integration of religion and state and a rejection of secular political principles. This is because the religious underpinnings that shape and inform Muslim political culture allow for it.

(ibid:152)

Hashemi’s book was published ten years ago, and it is interesting to see how in certain respects, he ‘got things wrong’. He stated that Indonesia and Turkey had the ‘brightest’ prospects for democracy. It is hardly a view one can hold in 2021, with Turkey in the grip of a ‘soft’ Islamist regime and Indonesia under pressure to introduce shari’a law at sub-national levels. Yes, Indonesia has continued to avoid self-identification as an Islamic state, and at the beginning of the new millennium, progressive Muslim thinkers (such as Abdurahman Wahid) were encouraged by one of

the main Muslim organizations in the country, Muhammadiyah. But that changed around 2005 when conservatives took over. Moreover,

proponents of a formalization of Islamic law within Indonesia's legal and judicial system are using the opportunities provided by the devolution and decentralization of power from the central government to provincial and local authorities to introduce 'Regional Shari'a Orders' or *perda syariat*.

(Kersten 2016:286/7)

As for Turkey, the Fetullah Gülen movement, with its 'soft and conciliatory voice on the most hotly debated subjects', was said to have an 'extensive' reach in Turkish society (Hashemi 2009:155f). Indeed, at the end of the first decade of the millennium, that was true: there was co-operation between the government of President Erdoğan and the movement. Yet that co-operation fell apart from 2014 and completely vanished as Erdoğan accused Gülen of being behind the 2017 coup attempt. Since then, the movement has been rigorously repressed in Turkey.

For all its openness to dialogue and its holding back from extreme views, the Gülen movement cannot really be seen as representing a liberal version of Islam. Yes, it can be argued that its 'interpretation of Islam is decidedly tolerant, pluralistic, modern, and compassionate' (ibid:156). And it is a *movement*, which holds together groups of people with broadly similar views. But it would be perverse to characterize these as 'liberal': its perspective on Islam remains conventional and conservative (see also Balci & Miller (eds.) 2012).

A significant problem with the concept of liberal Islam arises from the fact that *mainstream* Islam tends to be called 'moderate' just because it keeps its distance from Islamic fundamentalist versions, which, largely because of their frequent appeals to violence, are much more in the public eye than the fundamentalists among Christians or Jews. Yet the fact that (often indiscriminate) violence is opposed hardly qualifies such 'moderates' as liberals. Mainstream Islam continues to assert that Islam is both the superior religion and the 'final' one – a far cry from the openness to other views promoted among Christian and Jewish liberals.

Many individual Muslims do, however, feel that it is alright to interpret Islam in a 'liberal' way – despite the fact that historically Islam holds that interpretation (*ijtihad*) is only permissible by officially sanctioned clergy – using free reason when approaching the sacred books of Islam. In this respect, they are in tune with many Islamic scholars from the 19th century onwards, who thought that the official interpreters, the mullahs, were too distant from the issues of contemporary society to be able to adequately relate to them. Yet there was always the risk of being called an apostate, which would potentially expose them to the violence of those who regarded themselves as the upholders of the true faith.

A valuable approach to liberal Islam can be found in Rabasa et al. (2007). While its focus is on what is needed to build moderate Islamic networks and to what kind of people priority should be given in this effort, it does actually discuss in some detail what can be meant by moderate (or liberal) Islam. While this is Rabasa's view rather than how moderate Muslim's define themselves, it is nevertheless useful.

Moderate Muslims are defined not so much in *religious* as in *political* terms: they are people

who share the key dimensions of democratic culture. These include support for democracy and internationally recognized human rights (including gender equality and freedom of worship), respect for diversity, acceptance of nonsectarian sources of law, and opposition to terrorism and other illegitimate forms of violence.

(ibid:66)

The idea of an Islamic state, run by self-appointed clerics, is taboo; the dividing line is whether *shari'a* should apply, as under *shari'a* men and women, and believers and unbelievers, do not have the same rights.

*Shari'a* is seen as a product of historical circumstances – cf. Jewish liberal views of the Torah and Talmud. Specifically, Gülen is said to promote a form of moderate Sufi Islam: here, again, we need to ask whether that moderate Islam is actually *liberal* or merely *not fundamentalist* – in other words, mainstream. The issue of gender equality is a touchstone: *shari'a* remains, in that respect, decidedly non-liberal. Rabasa reminds us that outside Europe, in countries such as Indonesia, moderate Islam may well have roots in local culture, ‘very different from the deracinated and globalized Islam of the Salafis’ (ibid:89). Yet criticism, let alone rejection, of core aspects of Islam is regarded by traditionalists as apostasy, which justifies the killing of such critics by any means, an issue that must surely be very much in the minds of individual Muslim liberals. Among contemporaries, one might mention Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988) from Pakistan or Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945) from Iran. Soroush distinguished between religion, which is ‘sacred and heavenly’, and religious knowledge, seen as ‘human and earthly’; the latter may, and needs to be, persistently criticized (Ahmed 2013). Soroush lasted in Iran until the year 2000, though stripped of all his public functions – eventually ending up in the USA.

There are other Islamic thinkers who can be regarded as liberals (see de Kadt 2018). Liberal Muslims believe that Islamic values are consistent with democracy, pluralism, human rights and individual freedoms. Yet they have not come together as such, have not seen themselves as a group, a movement, nor have they acted as such. Consequently, while there are liberal Muslims, one cannot speak of a liberal Islam.

### A brief conclusion

Which of the findings above are most noteworthy? I would begin with the fact that in the 21st century, possibly with the exception of Roman Catholicism, among the Abrahamic religions, it is *fundamentalism*, rather than any liberal variety, that stands out as growing in influence and numbers: Christian Pentecostalism, the Jewish sense of superiority increasingly nurtured in Israel, violence in support of religion among both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. And there is no indication that this is likely to change any time soon.

Liberal religious views have developed more strongly since the 19th century, and for all varieties, the focus, today, is less on the afterlife and more on the here and now: on civil rights, the rights of gays and lesbians, the environment in a broad sense. There is a measure of uncertainty around the meaning of ‘God’, though this hardly shows up in the liturgy and prayers. Individual liberals (in fact, individuals among *all* believers) differ in the extent to which they follow the prescriptions and prohibitions of their religious community: some are quite strict, many can be said to be lax about the details. Even so, liberal religion is emphatically not regarded, by its proponents, as ‘religion lite’.

It was among Protestants that liberal views first crystallized out in The Netherlands in the late 16th century, with separate liberal communities gradually being set up and coming together in distinct movements. Tolerance of other beliefs was distinctive for these right from the start; theology was not set in stone and could be examined critically. Top-down authority has been frowned upon, as has patriarchy in more recent times. A range of views continues to flourish among liberal Protestant communities.

Liberal views have emerged in the RC Church much later, with the Papacy of John XXIII, notably through the Second Vatican Council called by him. Distinct movements of a liberal kind were formed in different parts of the world. In Latin America, Liberation Theology was a fore-

runner (though liberal mainly in a socio-political sense rather than theologically). In the USA, the movement CTA was distinctly anti-patriarchal and innovated in ways that brought the ire of the hierarchy upon it. There, a distinct development was that of the emergence of *non-Roman* Catholic communities, which followed in broad lines Catholic liturgies but explicitly distanced themselves from the tutelage of Rome.

Liberal Jewish communities, in the USA as well as in Europe, to a greater or lesser degree distanced themselves from the strict observance that was expected by the Orthodox: the emphasis shifted away from 'rules' as developed in the Old Testament and later Jewish texts, towards greater stress on 'meaning' and social relevance, as developed by the Prophets. Even though the representation of God continues to be strictly traditional in the liturgy, there is theological hesitancy around the concept. Equality between women and men is a centrepiece, and community action is encouraged.

Finally, as for Islam, religion continues to be central to Islamic societies, be they Sunni or Shi'a, and this is to an extent reflected among Muslims in the 'diaspora'. Anything regarded as unorthodox tends to be rejected, and those who hold unorthodox views may well be called apostates, making them liable to attack (even to death) on the part of traditionalists. This is a serious problem for individuals, especially Imams, who interpret Islam in a liberal manner, the Islamic liberals. Islamic law, treats people unequally – men versus women, Muslims versus non-Muslims. Islamic liberals take their distance from that aspect of the shari'a, as well as from the idea of an Islamic state, which imposes its views on citizens. Yet Islamic liberals are circumspect in their presentation of self, and (hence?) there are no organizations that explicitly represent them, in contrast to those found among Christians and Jews.

Liberal religion exists – but it continues to be a rather fragile plant.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Miller (2010).
- 2 Hinduism, under the Modi government, has become clearly more 'illiberal', and some research on the liberals in that situation would be interesting. However, this has to be left to others, more knowledgeable in that area than myself.
- 3 Among recent analyses see, for example, Annelise Reid's MA thesis for Leiden University (2017): *Moved by the Spirit: Sensing the Divine in a Pentecostal Church*. <https://www.religiousmatters.nl/buidings-images-and-objects/article/moved-by-the-spirit-sensing-the-divine-in-a-dutch-pentecostal-church/>
- 4 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/527782/population-of-the-netherlands-by-religion/>
- 5 Heidi Schlumpf gives the same figure in a recent article, notwithstanding the fact that the movement is said to have lost some 5000 members over the past decade (Schlumpf 2019).
- 6 See below, Byrne on the non-Roman Catholics.
- 7 See also the US charismatics website: [nsc-chariscenter.org/about-ccr/](http://nsc-chariscenter.org/about-ccr/).
- 8 See the World Council of Churches' summary article on the Old Catholics: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/church-families/old-catholic-churches>

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