Orthodox Judaism is Changing: A Book Review

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Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin's 54th book "Mysteries of Judaism III" will be published in the near future.

Professor Chaim Waxman, a prominent and highly respected sociologist of contemporary Orthodoxy, has made a superb assessment of the history, development, and current and future situation of Orthodoxy in his relatively short but comprehensive 178-page book, "Social Change and Halakhic Evolution in American Orthodoxy," with 48 additional pages of bibliography and index. Readers will receive a wealth of information from the book and much in it will surprise them, especially the finding that Orthodoxy is changing and different styles of Orthodoxy exist in different countries. The following is a summary of a few of the many insights that he offers in his insightful book.

A few statistics of Jews in the US
Waxman quotes the Pew Center Survey that estimates that 1.5 percent of US citizens, about 3,638,000, are Jews by religion. Pew also estimates that about 12 percent of this number, 437,000, are Orthodox. Of these 12 percent, 66 percent, about 291,000 are ultra-Orthodox, and half this number, 33 percent, about 146,000, are Modern Orthodox. Orthodox Jews have an average income lower than non-Orthodox Jews, and ultra-Orthodox have a lower income than Modern Orthodox. Pew found that the percentage of divorced or separated Orthodox Jews, 9 percent, is lower than that of Mainline Protestants, 12 percent, and Catholics, 10 percent. Pew also found that among Jews with no denominational affiliation, only 31 percent had a Jewish spouse, while the figure for Orthodox was 98 percent. Surprisingly, while 79 percent of ultra-Orthodox are married, only 52 percent of Modern Orthodox are married, a slightly lower rate than that of Conservative Jews.

The origin of Orthodoxy

The term Orthodox did not exist before the nineteenth century. It was invented by Reform Jews in eastern Europe who used it to disparage what they considered backward, old style, more observant Jews. Soon thereafter, the more observant Jews accepted the title as a badge of honor. The term Orthodox is based on Greek words: ortho = right or true, and dox = belief or opinion. Despite what Orthodox means, many Orthodox Jews in the past and today are not literally people who agree with the traditional “beliefs and opinions.” They are Orthopractic, Jews who have decided to continue all or many of the traditional “practices” of Judaism. They accept many ancient Jewish laws and traditions “but not meticulously or rigidly so.”

Among Ashkenazi Orthodox Jews, those descendant from Europe, there are two main groups today, each divided into sub-groups: Ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox. The former is subdivided into yeshivish who contend that Jewish males should separate themselves from modernity as much as possible and spend their life studying Talmud, and hasidish who follow the demands of Hasidic leaders called Rebbes. Modern Orthodox is subdivided into Centrist Orthodox and Open Orthodox, with the last adopting less restrictions and are more open to the involvement of women in the synagogue.

The Orthodox in America have a stronger attachment to Israel than do non-Orthodox American Jews. Orthodox Jews place greater emphasis on the law focusing on humans, bein adam ladam, while the ultra-Orthodox emphasize laws that focus on God, bein adam lamakom, generally ignoring the former. Thus, for example, 56.9 percent of Modern Orthodox feel that homosexuality should be accepted by society, but only 35.6 percent of ultra-Orthodox agree.

Rabbis

Contrary to what people suppose, ancient rabbis did not have a significant role in synagogues, they were “viewed as talmudic scholars and halakhic experts. Particularly in the area of isur veheter, ritual law, which includes kashrut, sexual conduct, sabbath observance, and so on. However, when it came to questions relating to broader matters, such as issues of communal policy, most people gave no special weight to the rabbi’s opinions and did not consult with them.” Rabbis “did not reign supreme” as they do today. The current notion that rabbis are elite individuals whose views must be followed did not exist in America until the twentieth century, is not a traditional teaching, but a copy by Orthodox Jews of the Hasidim and the Hasidic Rebbe.

Also contrary to what many think, “customs start with the masses, and go from the bottom up, sometimes to the point where they become actual laws.” Thus, despite the recent powers given to rabbis, we can expect that the more educated Orthodox Jews of today will bring about changes in laws and behavior. Many Orthodox Jews are dissatisfied with how Orthodoxy is practiced today and this will prompt change. “The 1990 National Jewish population survey indicated that ‘among those raised Orthodox, just 24 percent are still Orthodox.’”

In the recently published “Megillat Esther Mesorat Harav,” Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik recognized this phenomenon. He is reported as recognizing that Purim was instituted as a holiday by common people, not rabbis nor Jewish leaders, and it was only after the people instituted the practice that the rabbis accepted it. He is right. This is how the book of Esther portrays what happened.

Turning to the right

Just as the Orthodox swerved to the right in copying the Hasidic view concerning rabbis, they did so also regarding education. While Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is highly respected in Modern Orthodox circles, and despite his co-educational classes in his Maimonides School in Boston, many Modern Orthodox day schools today separate boys and girls in different classes. Similarly, because the ultra-Orthodox insist on their own “higher” standards for the laws of kosher, many certifying agencies require food sellers to bow to their requests to obtain their certification resulting in much higher prices for kosher foods, often twice the price of non-kosher foods. Still another radical change was pioneered by ArtScroll and Mesorah Publications which publishes many books on Judaism and Jewish history, “Critics have argued that ArtScroll censors its books to present only Orthodox accounts and Perspectives.” Also, lamentably, many Orthodox synagogues have recently rejected the teaching of Maimonides, who quoted the Greek non-Jew Aristotle in his writings, and who explained that “The truth is the truth no matter what its source,” and replaced the highly respected “Pentateuch” by Chief Rabbi J. H. Hertz with the censored ultra-Orthodox ArtScroll Chumash because Rabbi Hertz included explanations of the Torah from non-Jewish scholars. Many other examples of mistaken turnings to the right can be cited, such as the new stringencies that the Chief Rabbinate in Israel have placed on conversions.

Waxman states: “The ‘turn to the right’ in American Orthodoxy was in large measure, a reflection of the broader turn to the right and the rise of fundamentalism in a variety of different countries and continents.” This seems to put the lie to the claim of many Orthodox Jews that they are not affected by non-Jews. “Much as many might deny it, Orthodoxy is affected by and does respond to

its social environment. This is why American Orthodoxy today is different from what it was a century ago, and it is different from Orthodoxy in the United Kingdom, Europe, and even Israel."

Torah from heaven

As late as fifty years ago, Orthodox Jews were united in believing that both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah were given by God to Moses at Sinai, with some, "such as Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Moshe Tendler, [who] went so far as to axiomatically assert a literal version of both parts of the credo, while others simply expressed a general allegiance to the credo itself without discussing the detailed implications." But, "Today the situation is dramatically different." Orthodox Jews in America, and even more so in Israel, are accepting many critical views about the Torah, as can be seen on the website "The Torah.com." Waxman attributes the change to "the emergence of a generation of college-educated Jews" in the second half of the twentieth century. Orthodox schools, including yeshivas, in the past were like the Catholics of the Middle Ages who prohibited the translation of the Bible because they felt that when the masses read the Bible, they can be misled away from Catholicism. Like them and for the same reason, Orthodox schools did not teach Torah only Talmud and selected books on ethical behavior in the past. But now, there is an "increase in the [study of the] Bible within the religious and traditional communities since the 1960s."

Similarly, while Orthodoxy in the past rejected the idea of evolution and even called it heresy, most Orthodox Jews today accept it as a fact: "in 2005, even the [Orthodox] Rabbinical Council of America issued an, admittedly very guarded, pro-evolution position."

Conclusion

Waxman concludes: "As has been shown throughout this book, American Orthodoxy is anything but static. It has changed and will continue to do so.… Although we cannot know precisely what the group will be like in the future, one thing is certain: it will not be the same as it is now."