

RELIGION AND NATIONALISM COMMON PROBLEMS FOR ARABS AND ISRAELIS

By Walter Zander

The question whether the State of Israel is based essentially on religious or on secular-national forces, and the changing relationship between these forces, has been the subject of discussion for several years. So has the related issue of the position of an Israeli citizen who is not of the Jewish religion (whether he be agnostic or Christian), and above all, the question Who - in the eyes of the Israel community - is a Jew?

It is of interest to note that these problems are not limited to Jews, but that the Arabs are faced with similar issues concerning the role of Islam in the modern national state.

In this connection two recent publications are of particular interest: *A Vision of History*,¹ a collection of essays by Albert Hourani of Oxford, one of the leading Arab thinkers on Middle East affairs, and a small book by Professor Mushin Mahdi of Chicago, which appeared in Germany under the title *Die geistigen und sozialen Wandlungen im Nahen Osten*.²

In an essay called 'Race, Religion and Nation-State', Hourani shows that for over a thousand years the divisions in the Middle East have been religious. The Ottoman Empire was primarily a religious state and its dominant element was Islam. The non-Moslem minorities of Christians and Jews, although they lived under the protection of the Sultan, were not regarded as members of the political community. They were organised into communities of their own, called millets, each regulating its own communal life in accordance with its own religious laws. There were a Jewish millet, under the Grand Rabbi of Constantinople, and Christian millets under the Greek and Armenian Patriarchs. But, as time went on, what had been religious tended to become national groups; "their basis became not so much religious belief as the fact that one's ancestors had held that belief." The European idea of nationalism spread in the Middle East, partly through education, partly through the example of its success in Europe. Gradually the millet changed to a nation, and the idea gained ground that every state should contain only one nation. For the Arab states this created a special problem: while the majority of Arabs were Moslems, a substantial minority were Christians. Many of them were Arabs by age-long tradition in language and national loyalty, On the other hand, the whole culture and history of Arab nationalism were inextricably bound up with Islam. Thus in the theories of nationalist writers a certain ambiguity developed. Is it possible to formulate a nationalist concept without reference to Islam, or is the Arab revival the key to a renaissance of Islam? Or again, is it conceivable to hold religious and national loyalties together? At the same time Hourani maintains - as a religious thinker - that all distinctions of nationality and race are ultimately of no importance.

STILL IN CONFLICT

Similarly Mushin Mahdi deals with the impact of Modernism on Islamic society. He traces this influence back to the Renaissance and Humanism, particularly to such thinkers as Machiavelli, Hobbes and Descartes, and shows the different solutions of the dilemma which have been attempted in our days: the experiment of a modern secular state in Turkey; the effort to establish an Islamic state in Pakistan; and the more tentative and cautious approach to these problems in the Arab countries and in Indonesia, where the conflict between Modernism and the followers of Islamic tradition continues. At the same time he is sceptical about the success and ultimate value of modernist ideas. He sees a fundamental moral crisis in the West - 'We may speak of an imminent end of Modernism and the rise of a new era' - and it may be that the Islamic countries are only at the beginning of a long road towards a political ideal. Like Hourani, Mahdi sees these issues "*sub specie aeternitatis*" and speaks of the "ruse of the world religions" (*List der Weltreligionen*) which has often succeeded in transforming forces to which they had to adapt themselves.

The impact of Modernism affects all religions, but Mahdi feels that Islam is concerned in a very particular way. While Christianity, he says, has in principle accepted a division between things spiritual and temporal, Islam, rather like Judaism, does not acknowledge such a division and, therefore, establishes more concrete and detailed rules for human behaviour than other religions. However, there is an additional reason why Judaism and Islam find themselves, in face of these developments, in a special position: each of these religions has been linked fundamentally with one particular people from the beginning. Thus, whilst Rome and Greece existed for a thousand years and played a significant part in history before they became Christian nations, Judaism was an intrinsic element of the very creation of the Jewish people, and Jewish religion and national consciousness have been indissolubly linked to each other throughout the ages. Similarly the Arab nation owes its existence to the religious forces of Islam which united the tribes of Arabia and remained the source of its strength throughout its history.

The relationship between Religion and Nationalism, therefore, has a special character in the case of Judaism and Islam; and in spite of the political antagonism between Israeli and Arab, both are faced - on a deeper level - with almost identical problems.

(1) Published by KHAYATS, 92-4 Rue Bliss, Beirut, Lebanon; obtainable through Constable & Co. Ltd., London, at 21s.

(2) Verlag ROMBACH Freiburg im Breisgau.