

WHERE DOES ISRAEL BELONG?

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Reflection on the Unesco controversy about regional groupings, and the meaning of Israel's Jewish identity.

The question of Israel's place in the regional groupings of Unesco which, in 1974, caused a profound crisis, is likely to come up again at the forthcoming General Conference of that organisation, due to take place in Nairobi in November 1976. It can be assumed that Israel will maintain its claim to be admitted to the European region, and it can be hoped that this time sufficient votes will be secured to achieve this aim. The issue, however, is not only one of votes, or of the attitude of the outside world, but concerns equally the vision which Israel itself has of its place among the nations. This is the more true since Israel during the proceedings did change its attitude on this basic question - the only member of Unesco ever to take such a step. It may be timely, therefore, to reflect once more on the matter, both under its diplomatic-political aspect and in view of the underlying, permanent issues which are involved.

Unesco is an agency of the United Nations. It has three organs: the General Conference which meets every two years; the Executive Board, consisting at present of 40 members, which meets twice or three times annually; and the Secretariat under the Director General. Membership is open to every member of the United Nations. It is direct and universal, and does not depend on any regional sponsorship or consent. A state, therefore, does not require any help from its neighbours to become a member of Unesco. In fact, the word "region" does not occur in Unesco's constitution. The constitution prescribes that the composition of the Executive Board shall be based on "a balanced geographical distribution"; and that appointments to the staff of the Secretariat be "on as wide a geographical basis as possible". But no rules exist on any regional groupings of the members.

Regionalism

Fairly early, however, in Unesco's history, the need for some informal regional groupings made itself felt, and the General Conference on various occasions used different definitions of regions for specific purposes. At the thirteenth session, in 1964, it laid down some general principles. It defined for activities in which "the representative character of states is an important factor" five regions: Africa; Latin America and the Caribbean; Arab States; Asia and Europe, and enumerated the members belonging to each group. The list was by no means complete. The United States, Canada, Israel, Australia and New Zealand were not included. Other states, such as Egypt and Algeria were shown as members of

two regions: Africa and Arab states. But since the arrangements were not meant to be comprehensive, nobody felt excluded.

The definition of the criteria from the beginning lacked uniformity. Africa, Europe and Asia were certainly geographical conceptions. The same may be said of "Latin America and the Caribbean" although cultural, historic and political elements played a part in the creation of the group. But the "Arab states" were defined already in 1962 as the "Arabic speaking area". The decisive criterion, therefore, was not physical geography, but political and cultural affinity.

Whilst the next General Conference was prepared, the matter of regional groupings was raised again in the committees; and during these discussions Israel expressed the desire to join the Asian region. The Israeli delegate stated "that his country had several reasons for wishing its participation in activities planned for the Asian countries. In the first place, Israel was geographically part of Asia. Secondly its population was predominantly of African and Asian origin, 70% of its primary school pupils coming from these two regions. In many respects, Israel was a developing country... and it was willing to share its experiences with the countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia."

At another occasion he declared that "the case for Israel's incorporation in the Asian region was obvious... the basic fact of geography rendered additional argument superfluous", and even went so far as to proclaim: "to dwell further on the matter would be as time-wasting as to present at length the case of France being a member of the European region". Most Asian members felt that Israel better join Europe. But no decision was made. The issue of regional groupings and the criteria for their formation was adjourned "sine die" to be studied in depth.

The matter of regional groupings was brought up again in 1973/74. By that time the number of member states had grown to 130, and the tendency to regional decentralisation had accordingly increased. There were long-drawn debates about the criteria which were to be applied. Some considered the facts of physical geography decisive. Others attached greater importance to historical and cultural affinities and to common interests. Again others stressed ethnic and social traditions, a shared desire for association or the effective or potential contributions to the activities of the region. But even more important than the criteria were the concrete cases themselves. Membership of a regional group had almost become a question of identity and was fought over with great emotions.

Switch to Europe

At that time Israel announced that it now wished to join Europe. But its case played a small part in the proceedings. The debate was dominated by the most powerful states who argued about their own positions in the regional groupings of the world organisation. Israel's case must be seen in this context.

There was first the case of the Soviet Union. From the beginning the USSR had been a member of the European region. It now wished to be admitted in addition to Asia. This request met with the determined opposition of China. It was true, the Chinese delegate declared, that the USSR had territory and populations in both Europe and Asia, but its political centre had always been in Europe, and it had always been generally acknowledged as a European state. A state could only be a single entity in international relations and have only one political centre. Politically, economically and culturally, in the past and the present, the USSR had always been a European state. Thus, at the first Bandung Conference of Afro-Asian States 1955, the Soviet Union had not been invited, and Mr. Nehru, the late premier of India, had clearly pointed out that "the Asian part of the Soviet Union has not been invited because politically it is part of a European unit". Likewise ten years later, Mr. Vinogradov, himself a Soviet ambassador to France, when asked whether the USSR was closer to Europe or to Asia had categorically replied: "The USSR is a European state, with part of it in Asia". Had since then, the delegate, he asked, the geographical position of the USSR changed, or had the political center of the USSR shifted from Europe to Asia ?

The second issue concerned Australia and New Zealand. Up until then these countries had not been attached to any region and now wished to join Asia. Their request was received in a general spirit of cooperation. New Zealand, stated its delegate, lies in the Pacific nearest to Asia. Whilst its cultural heritage may be drawn in large part from Europe, its flourishing Maori, Polynesian and Oceanic cultures originated in South East Asia. The Polynesian component of the population was increasing rapidly both from the natural increase of the Maori element and from the flow of people from the Pacific Islands. Of comparatively recent European settlement, and with a substantial indigenous Maori population, New Zealand was in the process of evolving a mixed society composed mainly of European and Polynesian races, but containing also elements of other Asian cultures, such as Indian and Chinese, and he assured the General Conference that New Zealand was anxious to play a full and active role in the formation and execution of Unesco's regional program in Asia.

Next were the cases of USA and Canada. They, too, had been unattached in the past and now wished to join Europe. The delegate of the USA declared that "no member should remain in isolation" and summed up the justification of his request in the monumental statement that "all American

cultural patterns are European". The delegate of France objected. He felt that regional groups essentially had to be based on the facts of physical geography, and that actually there should be a region of the Western Hemisphere. He understood that for political reasons the USA might find it difficult to join with the other members of that continent. But did it follow that the USA should at all costs be part of Europe, regardless of the reservations on the subject held by a considerable number of the states concerned? Was that in accordance with common sense and equality? If there really was a cleft between the two Americas, the North American subcontinent by itself could very well constitute a regional entity within the United Nations and Unesco; North America did in fact possess its own specific character and owing to its power, its influence and the size of its population, not to mention the intellectual and scientific capital, a group formed by the USA and Canada could well bear comparison with other regional entities.

European Links

Canada on its part made an impressive plea. "The fundamental characteristics of Canada," wrote its delegate, "link it clearly with Europe, as do its historical and present day connections with that continent. The vast majority of the Canadian population has come from various parts of Europe, and in many cases quite recently. There is an indisputable affinity between Canada and Europe in the matters coming within Unesco's sphere of competence. The two official languages of Canada are French and English, and if there has to be a definition of "cultural region" for the purposes of the regional conferences of Unesco, Canada and Europe cannot belong to different regions".

Israel did not explain why it had changed its plea. In fact, it did not submit any memorandum (as New Zealand and Canada had done) to substantiate its claim in depth. But in response to an invitation of the Executive Board it addressed a letter, dated 14 August 1973, to the Director General. In this it stressed the great importance it attached to full participation in the regional activities. Concerning the choice of the region the letter said:

"The government of Israel feels that the close ties and the similarity of conditions which exist between members of the European region and Israel in the areas of major concern to Unesco would enable Israel to make a worthwhile contribution to the activities of the region, as well as to derive much benefit from them.

In order to enable Israel to discharge its duty to Unesco and to make its rightful contribution to the formulation and execution of Unesco's regional activities, my government therefore requests that the Executive Board, when called upon to decide on invitations to regional meetings of an intergovernmental character, will consider Israel as forming part of the European region".

The case of Israel was supported in the General Conference by the President of the Conseil Consultative d'Organisations juives. He did not give any concrete reasons why Israel should be included in the European region, but expressed fear that Israel's very existence was endangered if it was not included in any of the regional groupings. In fact, not to be included in any of the regional groupings seemed to him equivalent to being excluded from the realm of geography and a prelude to physical annihilation.

Referring to the resolutions before the conference he implored the members:

“Votre Assemblée générale va avoir à se prononcer sur ce qui est, en fait, l'exclusion d'un Etat de la géographie de cette terre: Etat qui ne peut se dire africaine parce qu'il est en Asie, ni arabe parce qu'il est hébreu, ni asiatique comme l'Australie - parce que le Proche-Orient n'est pas inclus dans l'Asie, ni européen enfin, bien que les nations européennes auraient accepté, j'en suis convaincu, qu'il fut porté sur la même liste qu'eux, comme l'ont été le Canada et les Etats-Unis d'Amérique. Cet Etat, en fait, annihilé.

Oh, je le sais, il y a dans cette assemblée tout un courant politique, qui, en attendant l'anéantissement d'Israël, veut que Israël soit sans existence. Et quoi de mieux pour prouver sa non-existence que de lui refuser toute situation géographique?”

He called upon the conference to rise above politics to the unifying sphere of culture.

When the votes were taken, Australia and New Zealand were admitted into the Asian region which was renamed Asia-Oceania. Likewise, the Soviet Union, besides being a member of Europe, was allowed into this group. The United States and Canada joined the European region which thus was transformed de facto, “though not in name”, into a European-North Atlantic region. All these resolutions were adopted by 85 votes to 2 with 9 abstentions (after a Chinese amendment about the Soviet Union had been rejected by 48 votes to 3, with 45 abstentions).

Defeat and Promise

Israel's request to join Europe was defeated by 48 votes to 38 with 31 abstentions. Of the 29 European Members 14 voted in favour and 11 against Israel's admission, while four abstained.

Whilst its membership with Unesco as such was not affected, Israel was left as the only member state not aligned to any regional group.

The conference also decided to examine any outstanding questions at the forthcoming nineteenth session and, in

October 1975, the Executive Board in preparation of this session took up the matter. It reaffirmed “the fundamental principle whereby every member state has the right and duty to participate fully and regularly in the organisation's regional and international activities”. It recalled its awareness “that the inclusion of a member state in a regional group cannot be obtained without the broad consent of the member states in the region concerned” and it introduced a new element into the debate by recommending that the General Conference, when deciding on membership in regional groups, should consider in future not only the principles set forth in previous resolutions, but should make its decisions “on the basis of the wishes of the member states already included in each of the various regions”. It can well be hoped, although it is not certain, that this recommendation will pave the way for Israel's admission to the European region at the next session. In many respects this would be a very desirable result. It would terminate, at least within a limited sphere, Israel's isolation and would help to allay the fear of “exclusion from geography as prelude to annihilation”. It would enable Israel to join without special invitation in all routine activities, a very welcome step towards further normalisation.

But would it in a deeper sense be fully satisfactory? Would it really answer the question of where Israel belongs? The fact that Israel itself during the proceedings has changed its mind on so basic an issue - the only nation ever to do so - indicates that the question is justified. Of course, for both pleas Israel has put forward convincing reasons: Israel is situated in Asia; the majority of its population came from Africa and Asia; and in many ways it is a developing country. On the other side: the links between Israel and the European-American world in the main spheres of Unesco's activities - science, scholarship, education and art - are incontestable. Both statements are true. But each represents only a part of the truth and even both together not the full truth. In order to ascertain the reality as a whole we shall have to go further and inquire into the vision which Israel itself has of itself and of its role in the world. In this context a decision of Israel's Supreme Court which seemingly has no connection with the subject is of striking importance. It is the case of the monk Daniel Rufeisen.

Brother Daniel

Rufeisen was born in Poland in 1922. His parents were Jews, and he was brought up as a Jew. In his youth he was active in the Zionist Youth Movement “Akiva” and underwent training for pioneering work, preparing for immigration to Palestine. After the outbreak of the German-Russian war, 1941, he succeeded in obtaining false papers purporting that he was a German Christian, and became a clerk in the German police station in Mir. There he used his position to warn the local Jewish community of impending dangers and provided them with weapons. As result some 150 Jews escaped with their lives, joining the ranks of the

partisans, and most of the survivors now live in Israel. He was betrayed and arrested but managed to flee. He found refuge in a monastery where he stayed a long time. He then joined the partisans himself, and at the end of the war received a Russian decoration for his war services. While in the monastery he had embraced Christianity; in 1945 he became a priest and entered the Order of the Carmelites, because he knew that it had a chapter in Palestine. After many difficulties he finally received permission of the ecclesiastical superiors and of the Polish government to emigrate to Israel, and one day presented himself in his monk's habit wearing the cross, to the immigration officer. Questioned about the purpose of his journey, he replied: I am the Jew Daniel Rufeisen and wish to return to the Land of my Fathers.

The case was submitted to the Minister in charge of immigration. His statements were investigated and the facts found to be true. The government offered him immediate naturalisation, but he refused and insisted on his claim to acquire Israel nationality on the strength of the Law of Return, as a Jew. The case now went before the Supreme Court. All five judges expressed their sympathy and sense of obligation which they as Jews felt for him. One of the judges thought the claim justified, but his fellow judges considered it impossible to accept Rufeisen, a Christian priest, as a Jew. They made clear that they were not concerned with religious (rabbinical) law, and that the term "Jew" had to be defined in the context of secular legislation by the Israeli parliament. But even so, they felt the term "Jew" could not be separated from its religious connotation. "What Brother Daniel is asking us to do", said Judge Silber, "is to erase the historical and sanctified significance of the term "Jew", and to deny all the spiritual values for which our people were killed during various periods of our long dispersion. For us to comply with this request would mean to dim the lustre and to darken the glory of the martyrs who sanctified the Holy Name in the Middle Ages to the extent of making them quite unrecognisable; it would make our history lose its unbroken continuity and our people begin counting its days from the emancipation which followed the French Revolution. A sacrifice such as this, no one is entitled to ask of us, even so meritorious as the petitioner before this Court."

Accordingly the monk Rufeisen, while being granted naturalisation as a welcome alien, was refused admission as a Jew under the Law of Return.

Race or Spirit

The significance of this judgment becomes even clearer if compared with the kindred case of Edith Stein. She was born a Jewess in Germany. She early showed great intellectual gifts and in due course became a university teacher in philosophy. In 1922 she converted to Catholicism and later joined the Carmelite Order in Cologne. During the war she was transferred at her request to a chapter of the

Order in Holland, since she feared that her presence might endanger the convent in Cologne. In August 1942 she was arrested by the Gestapo. All entreaties of the Mother Abbess and the efforts of the ecclesiastic authorities were in vain. She was brought to the camp in Westerbork. There, according to a survivor, she stood out in the general distress "by her calm, comforting those in despair and bringing peace like an angel". She was gassed in Auschwitz one week later.

Both Oswald Daniel Rufeisen and Edith Benedicta Stein were Hebrews. According to the Nazis, all that mattered was race, the spirit being irrelevant. To the judges of the Supreme Court of Israel neither race nor national heroism were enough. What mattered was the spirit; and the Court established that even in secular legislation the term "Jew" contains an indestructible religious element.

The late Yaacov Herzog in his posthumously published speeches relates how one day as Director General in the Prime Minister's office he was host to fifteen non-Jewish heads of theological faculties in the United States who wanted to discuss with him the spiritual nature of Israel reborn. In reply he referred them to one line of the Bible, Numbers 23 Verse 9. It is part of the story concerning the Mideanite Prophet Balaam who set out to curse Israel, but instead was moved to bless it. The passage he had chosen was : "the people shall dwell alone". This, he thought, was the innermost nature of Israel reborn. And he went on to say that Balaam was the greatest prophet of the nations of the world of whom the Sages say : "In Israel there arose none like Moses, but among the nations of the world there arose such one and he was Balaam; because his prophecy related not to events as they will unfold, but to the nature of a people until the end of time. Balaam, he maintained, had indeed foretold the nature of the Jewish people over thousands of years. Therefore his prophecy was put above all other prophecy except Moses.

A People Set Apart?

Then he raised the question: Has this prophecy remained true to the present day? Has it been fulfilled in the realities of history? Has the prophecy "a people set apart" stood the test of time?

"Of the state of Israel", he told them, "there is no question that this is so. Israel is alone - contrary to what the original theoreticians of Zionism assumed, that we would become like all nations and become a normal people. Now, 1718 years later we are still alone; we have friends across the world and yet we are isolated. We belong neither to East nor West, neither Nato nor the Warsaw Pact, neither to the Afro-Asian bloc nor the underdeveloped countries. We belong to no framework except our own. We are totally isolated in the inner sense of family".

And in conclusion he added : “There is but one people in the world that has one religion, and one religion in the world that has but one people”. A people that shall dwell alone in messianic expectation. This was his message.

Nearly a hundred years ago Pinsker proclaimed: “We are everywhere present and nowhere at home”; and many believed that all what was needed was the establishment of a national state. Now, with the state established it almost seems as if the state itself continues to wander from continent to continent knocking at the gates, asking for admission. At present Israel is applying for membership in Europe. It is suggested to supplement this request by a statement that, as soon as conditions will permit, Israel intends to join in addition an Eastern group, be it Asia or a new region of the Middle East. In some measure this would express its special relationship with East and West. But beyond this, the old question remains, how can Israel’s position among the nations be based on its uniqueness.