

ABSTRACT

In my research I examined Orthodox Jewish community values and the responses given to modernity in the Hungarian-language Budapest Orthodox weekly papers between 1891 and 1944. These are the responses of a journalism elite of an urbanising religious community to the trends towards individualisation as well as to changing attitudes towards the past and community traditions.

First of all there is a need to define such key concepts as modernity and tradition. Academic research on the social history of Jews in Hungary uses the concept of modernity in the sense of industrial modernity or avoids it entirely. But modernity is a key concept in the American, West European and Israeli Jewish studies literature where it is applied to process models. In contrast with Hungarian research that is carried out within national historical frames they examine the trends studied in an imperial or wider regional comparison. Here the emphasis shifts to trends spanning national borders, for example in research carried out by Eli Lederhendler, Hillel J. Kieval, Adam S. Ferziger and others. At the same time the local economic, political and cultural context is an important consideration in the multiple modernities approach, especially in the comparative research on Russian and Ottoman Jewish modernity by Sarah Abrevaya Stein.

Defining the concept of tradition is difficult not only because of the vague use of the term in ethnology and classical anthropology but also because of the influence certain recent Jewish strategies have on the scholarly definitions. Jakov Katz and the Jerusalem School that adapted European social history relativised the concept of tradition and opened the way to the constructivist interpretation of Orthodoxy and its “scholarly” critique from a secular national viewpoint. A modern-Orthodox religious response within scholarly frames has been made in recent years by Ferziger. He placed German Orthodoxy in a process where it was adapting to the changed conditions for the sake of survival of the religious community, its self-interpretation and regulation of its attitude towards nonobservant groups. Observant Jews develop models to deal with modernity and to a certain extent maintain solidarity with Jews outside the group. In this interpretation Orthodox religious tradition is not a traditionalist creation departing from “true” Judaism, but the adaptation of the religious person to the social reality of his time in the interest of preserving his own world view. This departs in some ways from premodern practice, but the departures are the necessary consequences of the new social situation.

The press is both an instrument and a mechanism of the changes of modernity. According to Sara Abrevaya Stein the press became the forum for issues related to the changed social and cultural circumstances, and often itself became an assistant of change.

In the investigation of the Budapest Hungarian-language Orthodox press, I regard modernity as a process. Modernity brought unprecedented new challenges and the communities were constantly forced to respond. The Hungarian-language Orthodox papers formulated these responses in the mirror of the chain of tradition. This means that they seek precedents for the challenges, often regarded by scholarship today as without precedent, in the mirror or religious tradition reaching back to the revelation, and find a way of incorporating them or where no way is found, reject them. In essence the chain of tradition is the series of genealogically linked, canonised written religious memories and religious authorities reaching back to the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The external authorities involved by enlightened and secular interpreters can have no role in this interpretation. The community selects among the modern phenomena in the spirit of the aspiration for traditionality. Striving to preserve its integrity it reaches a *modus vivendi* with its constantly changing environment.

However, the opinions and strategies appearing in the press should not be confused with the everyday practice of the actual communities. Only the opinion-shaping intention of the journalism elite can be detected behind the press. We know relatively little about the readers. Even the letters from readers are the results of a process of editing. Nevertheless, the opinion of the journalism and publishing elite is not independent of the real community life. It was not only the press but also the institutional system above the communities that created the new phenomenon of modernity. The (Central) Orthodox Office serving national representation can also be regarded as such an institution. The elite editors and journalists of the Hungarian-language Orthodox papers in Budapest were in close contact with the Orthodox Office, as secretaries, legal consultants or in some other capacity.

The papers had differing functions, they adapted to the given social circumstances and were influenced by the political and economic changes. One thing they all had in common was that they represented group interests aspiring to traditionalism in face of the new trends of modernity.

Budapest Orthodoxy appeared in the last third of the 19th century and was in continuous contact with Jews in other parts of the country. The strongest influence came from Pressburg, but the strategies of German neo-Orthodoxy also appeared in the Orthodox middle class of Pest and in some districts new immigrants with ties to Hassidic rebbes were also a factor.

This reading public was not monolingual: in addition to the increased adoption of the Hungarian language from the Compromise of 1867 there were also users of Hebrew, jüdisch-deutsch and German. This was reflected to varying degrees in the different papers.

The papers themselves also adapted to the modernity for the discussion of which they provided a forum. The *Zsidó Híradó* [Jewish News] represented Orthodox interests in face of the liberal power elite in the debates on reception. The *Magyar Zsidó* [Hungarian Jew] articulated Orthodox interests against the unification. *Hitőr* [Guardian of the Faith], a short-lived Orthodox illustrated family paper satisfied the literary and artistic demands of the Orthodox bourgeoisie within frames complying with religious laws. However, the jüdisch-deutsch *Allgemeine Jüdische Zeitung* became an Orthodox daily outside the Central Office. This publication was banned during the 1919 Republic of Soviets and its relaunching was prevented by the loss of its reading public following the Trianon peace dictate. Switching its language to Hungarian, it was launched again as *Zsidó Újság / Orthodox Zsidó Újság* [Jewish Paper / Orthodox Jewish Paper] after the economic and political consolidation in 1925 and existed until the German occupation.

The questions of modernity were formulated at different levels of life and, depending on the social context, resulted in different religious responses aspiring to traditionalism. Such levels include measures by the state and legislation affecting the law on religion, attacks on the consciously modernising strategies of Orthodoxy, the attempts by Neology at a cultural mission and the struggle waged for the exclusive representation of Jews, the question of urban institutional and family religious socialisation, the weakening of earlier patterns of family life and gender roles, and keeping the leisure time of youth and its self-organisation within religious frames.

The question of Hungarian civil religion that was emerging in that period is a good example of the attitude towards the state and legislation. The modern state was judged – like other phenomena – in the light of the act on religion. *Dina dimalchuta dina*, the law of the land is law, as long as it is not directed against the Jewish community and Judaism. As regards legislation and enforcement, it was mainly the reception debates and the question of the operation of certain Talmudic schools that appeared in this context. In the course of the reception debates attempts were made to direct the attention of legislation to gaps between the act on religion and secular law, possibilities of abuse and insoluble situations. Behind the questions raised was the responsibility felt for Jews as a whole and the idea of solidarity, and applied especially to the nonobservant. In the case of the yeshivas they tried to dispel anti-

Judaism notions or to formulate an apologia towards Hungarian society in face of the attacks of religious reform representing the Jewish enlightenment.

The principle of *Dina dimalchuta dina* also extended to the adaptation of civil religion considered to be a modern phenomenon. At the death of great national figures and their important anniversaries the Orthodox press commemorated the dead according to the traditions of Judaism. It was often attacked because of the resulting absence of mourning borders, attacks that were counterbalanced, for example in the case of Mór Jókai or Lajos Kossuth by their incorporation into the memory of Orthodoxy. Jókai became the supporter of Orthodox institutional interests and as a child Kossuth's life was saved by the Tsadik of Újhely, Moshe Teitelbaum who predicted his future greatness.

The Neology press, in the spirit of the rationalism of the Enlightenment, its empirical demand and historical attitude, often rationalised religious traditions as folklore or part of the religious historical past. The Orthodox press also criticised this, often in the form of strongly worded letters from readers in defence of the Sacred Torah and the religious authorities.

In many areas of religious life the press pointed out practices differing from Orthodoxy with the aim, apart from strengthening its own group values, of proving the impossibility of attempts to unify the Orthodox and Neology trends. One of these was the issue of religious education, which at the turn of the century still affected only religious education in the higher elementary schools, but in the interwar years it also drew attention to the financial problems of traditional religious education. In both cases it stressed the importance of religious socialisation in the family and the need for parents to set a religious example. It recommended to all the Jewish citizens of Pest at the turn of the century that fathers should introduce their sons to the traditional religious literature and if they did not have sufficient training for this they should hire a teacher with a religiously impeccable life. It considered it essential for teachers and religious instructors to set an example of following religion in everyday life. It often accused the Neology religious instructors of degrading religious education into the history of religion. In the new social and political environment of the interwar years, saving the Talmudic schools became identified with the cause of saving the Jews. On the one hand this meant passing on the Torah to the next generation in a chain that should not be broken even in situations of crisis, and on the other hand the pressure on the Jews was regarded as God's punishment for departure from the path of Orthodoxy that could only be corrected by repentance, greater religious devotion and withdrawal into the frames of the religious community. The press called for the return of all Jews within the protective barriers of Orthodoxy.

The Hassidic rebbes, Orthodox rabbis and their wives became the filters of modernity. Behind this was the need for families to meet the challenges created by the urbanisation of Budapest, the housing culture, food supply, modern work and the changing leisure time, fashion and mass literature, something for which they had no previous patterns. In addition the modern urban secular environment seeped into the families too, and parental example was being replaced by examples of the family of religious authorities. Tiferesz Bachurim, the Orthodox adaptation of youth movements, became important in the religious education and leisure time activity of Orthodox boys in Budapest. The intention was to keep youth away from other movements and within the frames of their own community. Orthodox religious practice outside Budapest and respected religious figures were held up as examples: Orthodox rabbis of Pressburg, Hassidic rebbes, as well as the Askhenazi Hassidic rebbes regarded as a transition between the two, the Hunsdorfer rabbi and his students. Mothers who followed middle class urban patterns were not regarded as suitable for the education of Orthodox girls. The girls, who would later become women, were the guarantees of the religiosity of the Jewish family home. Their education was therefore a matter of key importance. Pattern-following was institutionalised, assisted also by the press with its news, and the wives of Orthodox rabbis were made patrons of the girls' societies.

The press strove to support the processes outlined above, providing a forum for the discussion of important community issues, the dissemination of appeals and the acknowledgement of donations. At the same time it also set the goal of addressing the modernising strata who could still be won for Orthodoxy. Some of the respected Orthodox rabbis and the self-organizing Orthodox citizens grouped around the Office regarded the press as the new instrument called for by the challenges of the new times.