Religion and religiosity are common themes in Israeli politics and play a large part in Israel’s social schisms. Scholars of religion and politics in Israel demonstrate that growing secularization occurs alongside religious resurgence and the entrenchment of religious institutional authority. We argue in this chapter that the strength of religion – whether it is political parties, institutions or public opinion – can be explained in its continued and essential role in boundary making. Religion, despite secularization, continues to delineate the boundaries of the Jewish state, and being Jewish remains an important criterion for citizenship and rights. In addition, with the rise of populism religious affiliation has more recently become a reference point separating the “people” from the “elites”. Accordingly, religion helps separate not only Jews from non-Jews, but also “good” (i.e. traditional and committed) from “bad” Jews (i.e. secular and detached). This separation, first, has become an essential tool for political parties claiming to represent the Jewish people. And, second, consequently, places severe limitations on secularization and secularism.

Dilemmas of a Jewish State

Zionism, emerging in the late nineteenth century, has stood in opposition to Jewish Orthodoxy. The nationalist ideology, calling upon Jews to take control over their destiny, rebelled against the view that Jewish redemption would come about with the advent of the Messiah. Accordingly, Judaism, a religion identified with the old world, was to be replaced with Jewishness, a modern identity based on culture, ethnicity, a historical sense of belonging to the Jewish people and a proactive approach towards the future. While some of the movement forefathers (most notably B.Z. Herzl) and its leading political movement (MAPAI, later the Labor Party) were essentially secular, religion and religiosity could hardly be dismissed. First, religion provided the national movement with unifying symbols, rituals (some secularized) and history. Second, national boundaries and questions of belonging adhered to religious principles of matrilineality and conversion. And, third, territorial claims were based upon historical continuity, the Bible and a divine promise.

In a series of agreements that came to be known as the “status quo” between the dominant MAPAI and the religious parties, the latter not only ensured the rights and privileges of religious people but also the monopoly of important aspects of public life. This included, on the
one hand, deferral (and de facto dismissal) of Ultra-Orthodox students from the mandatory military service and the autonomy of a religious education system. On the other hand, the provision and regulation of marriage, divorce and burial were under Orthodox monopoly. As a result, among other things, civil marriage (and any other non-Orthodox marriage) was not an option for non-religious Jews. The status quo is often attributed to a letter sent by David Ben-Gurion, then Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive to Agudat Israel, the ultra-Orthodox religious party, requesting its support vis-à-vis the UN Special Committee on Palestine in 1947.

The commission was to make recommendations for Palestine after Britain announced it would end its mandate, and the Zionist movement wanted a united Jewish front. In the letter, which became a cornerstone of religious-secular arrangements, Ben-Gurion laid down a basic agreement on the Jewish character of the state of Israel that enabled secular and religious political elites to formulate compromises and avoid conflicts (Don-Yehia, 2000). After independence, the status quo was formalized and developed, included also the national-religious party, and operated as a guideline for religious-secular negotiations and governing coalition agreements during the first decades of statehood (Susser and Cohen, 2000).

The decision of Ben-Gurion and MAPAI to compromise, despite their dominance, is often explained by the approach known as mamlahtiyut. The approach placed the state at the center of collective life of the Jewish nation and upheld the functionality of the status quo for reinforcement of consensus with respect to the state. It also had a pragmatic aspect, a focus on the challenge of state building and the concern with external security threats that marginalized secular-religious differences. Politically, the consensus was secured by political interests and cooperation between the dominant Labor Party and the major religious national party (the Mizrahi). This cooperation allowed the Labor Party to dominate foreign policy and security policy in return for Orthodox monopoly over significant aspects of public life. For the Ultra-Orthodox party, reluctant to take part in the Zionist project, exemptions from military service, autonomy for their education system and gradually also funding for their institutions was enough to ensure their implicit support.

Beyond pragmatism, the status quo was accepted by the majority of non-religious Israelis who were generally supportive of the compromises as they continued to relate to codes, values, symbols, and a collective memory that could hardly be separated from Jewish religion (Kimmerling, 2004, p. 354). Also, and central to our argument here, religion was instrumental if not indispensable for boundary making and maintenance. The Bible and Jewish religious tradition, after selection and re-interpretation, provided for Zionism a narrative of continuity of national-hood, connection to the land, culture and a calendar for national life. The gap between religious groups and a large proportion of the secular population was narrowed not only by common symbols but also by the widespread loyalty shared to the idea of a “Jewish state” and the instrumentality of religion for maintaining boundaries (Ben-Porat, 2013). Consequently, religion was called up as the gatekeeper to provide the criteria for inclusion and exclusion (Ben-Porat, 2000; Ram, 2008).

**Secularization**

The agreements that sustained the status quo gradually eroded in face of three major changes that undermined its foundations: globalization and consumer culture, the immigration from the former Soviet Union and more assertive non-religious groups that offered new interpretations to Jewish identity. The modest collectivist ethos and the limited material resources available in early statehood provided a protective shield for the status quo. Conversely, globalization and economic growth that took off in the 1990s introduced new incentives and preferences. New
Lifestyles rendered the restrictive arrangements of the status quo difficult to maintain. Individualism, hedonism and consumerism began to organize Israeli middle-class daily life (Carmeli and Applebaum, 2004), and the desire for new experiences and the new leisure patterns—shopping on the Sabbath, or non-kosher food—were often incompatible with the religious restrictions of the status quo. For religious people, also influenced by consumer culture, the religious rules held firm, although some challenges to religious authority have emerged in relation to the use of internet or mobile phones, for example.

The million immigrants who arrived in Israel from the former Soviet Union between 1989 and 2000 were not only more secular than their Israeli peers (Ben-Rafael, 2007; Leshem, 2001), many of them, due to intermarriage in the former Soviet Union did not meet the Orthodox criteria of Jewishness (Ben-Rafael, 2007). Consequently, immigrants were granted citizenship under the Law of Return (1970) but were not considered Jewish by the Orthodox establishment unless they would go through an Orthodox conversion process. The sheer scale of this immigration produced a critical mass of demand for Russian culture and imported products, including pork. Russian food stores selling non-kosher and other imported food products were established across the country. The status quo agreements and the Orthodox monopoly caused considerable difficulties for the immigrants, especially for those not recognized as Jews who, among other difficulties they experienced, could not marry in Israel, strengthening the demand for change.

Ideational developments also took a new turn of challenging the Orthodox monopoly, demanding that alternative Jewish identities be recognized by the state and receive an equal stance to Jewish Orthodoxy. This included Reform and Conservative Judaism, initially small and based mainly on immigrants from English-speaking countries, but with substantial backing from their related communities in the United States. This backing not only enabled them to function without government funding but also to expand and reach out also to native Israelis. An additional set of alternatives known as secular or cultural Judaism developed in the 1990s. The open and critical reading of texts and, more important, the re-interpretation of rituals and commandments directly challenged religious orthodoxy and the status quo (Ben-Porat, 2013).

**Being Jewish**

Despite secularization, the majority of Israelis, including those who defined themselves as non-religious, remained attached to religion. Israelis accepted restrictions on marriage and burial choices, activities on the Sabbath, and the sale of non-kosher meat. All perceived constitutive to the Jewish character of the state or their own Jewish identity, part of a necessary compromise between religious and secular, or simply an issue of minor importance that did not affect their everyday lives enough to justify its politicization. They took part in religious rituals during holidays (Passover) and preferred religious ceremonies. Jewish Orthodoxy, therefore, acted as what Grace Davie (2007) described as a vicarious religion: “performed by an active minority but on the behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing”. The role religion played in private lives and its role as a gatekeeper of the national boundaries has rendered the possibility of separating state and religion unlikely, even for those who described themselves as “non-religious”.

Religion and religious institutions have not remained passive. Rather, a new word “HADATA”, meaning an attempt to de-secularize and make religious presence and authority stronger, was introduced to describe its return. Secular, or non-religious Israelis, and political parties representing them, claimed that religious parties are attempting to change the status quo and impose religion and religious dictums upon them. Hadata, or “religionization”, implies
the growing presence of religion in public life and possibly dominance or even hegemony (Peled and Peled, 2019) of religious-Zionism. This includes not only the political system but also the growing presence of religious commanders in the military, more religious content in school systems and growing perceptions that Israel is becoming more religious (Peled and Peled, 2019, pp. 19).

The return to religion was most evident among Mizrahim (Jews who immigrated from Muslim countries and their descendants) with the rise of Shas, a political party that gained prominence from the 1980s onward. Combining ethnicity and religiosity, Shas advocated a return to tradition against the secularization forced on Mizrahi immigrants. Shas organized its activities using an extensive network of educational and welfare institutions, constituting a substitute for the receding welfare state and thereby reinforcing the party’s standing with both the state, which used it as an intermediary, and with its voters, who became more dependent on this party network (Levi and Amreich, 2001). Through its extensive educational and welfare network, Shas became an important player in promoting religious (and anti-secular) Jewish identity. The party’s constituency was not necessarily haredi, as its voters often identified with its social and ethnic message, but the vote for Shas was a vote for a more religious state (Susser and Cohen, 2000, p. 120). Shas’s electoral power, enhanced by its education and social network, enabled it to promote different proposals to curb the secularizing trends.

The party’s two central goals are ‘Restoring the Crown – of the Torah – to its Ancient Glory’ and advancing social justice (Shas home page). Restoring the Crown to its Ancient Glory’ is first and foremost an ethnic matter, raising the status and stature of the Mizrahi identity and culture in Israel’ (Yadgar, 2003). Shas’ populism is built around three Manichean oppositions between ‘us and them’ – Sephardic religious versus secular Jews, Mizrahim versus Ashkenazim, and Jews versus non-Jews. For Shas, Jewish religious and national belonging conflate; there is no national existence outside religion. Shlomo Benizri (a former Shas leading politician) has said, ‘Israel is a nation only through the Torah’ (Benizri, Shas home page). Shas’ vision of the political, of democracy, and of politics is profoundly anti-liberal. In accordance with traditional religious views, its leaders do not believe in the separation of spheres – personal and political, state and civil society, state and church. Religion is an inseparable part of the public sphere, and state institutions should be subordinated to religious authority.

Three more developments we explore in this chapter explain the power of religion and religious institutions vis-à-vis their role in boundary setting. First, the attempt of religious-Zionism to assume a leading role or hegemony and in so doing placing religion at center stage. Second, the rise of conservatism, providing another linkage between religion and boundary setting. And, third, the emergence of populism and religion serving as a market separating both “people” from “non-people” and “real people” from “elites”.

**Religious-Zionism**

Religious-Zionists are approximately 12% of the Israeli Jewish population, though politically they are an extremely influential movement in Israeli politics. Religious-Zionists are the driving force behind the Israeli settlement project in the West Bank, as these settlements were established in order to prevent a peace agreement with the Palestinians, strengthening and tightening Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land and people. Religious-Zionism attempted to establish itself since the 1970s as the heir to the largely secular-Zionist movement, insisting that the latter has lost its ability to lead.

Since its inception, the Zionist movement has been carrying the burden of an internal contradiction between the universal and the particular – “a state like all others” versus “a light unto
Religion and politics in Israel

On the one hand, the Zionist movement aimed to create a national Jewish identity that is not based on religion and establish a modern secular nation-state. On the other hand, the Zionist movement had to rely on certain aspects of the Jewish religion – i.e. reviving the Hebrew language, biblical symbolism, and even the word “Zion” itself – in order to create a shared identity that could mobilize Jews around the world to support the movement and immigrate to Palestine. Notwithstanding several controversies, the status quo arrangements kept this internal contradiction relatively latent under the Labor-Zionist secular hegemony. Yet this equilibrium began to change during the 1960s and 1970s, when some religious-Zionists started to challenge the secular hegemony and demanded a greater presence to religion in the Israeli public sphere and government policy (Kimmerling, 2004; Peled and Herman Peled, 2019).

Some researchers understand religious-Zionism as a unique ideology, bringing together observance of the Orthodox religious code (Halacha) and political commitment to the Zionist movement and the State of Israel. However, while it indeed began as a distinct political movement, today it is impossible to find an ideological common denominator among the social group referred to as “religious-Zionism” (Katsman, 2020). At first, the term “religious-Zionism” was used to refer to a specific political faction within the Zionist movement, which represented Jewish-Orthodox supporters of the Zionist movement, in contrast to most Orthodox Jews who were opposed to the Zionist movement. In 1902, the Orthodox Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Reines organized a conference for the religious-Zionist movement, in which the ‘HaMizrahi’ movement was founded, and Rabbi Reines was declared as the movement’s leader. ‘HaMizrahi’s’ slogan was ‘The Land of Israel, for the People of Israel, according to the Torah of Israel’. In response to the aforementioned Orthodox opposition, Rabbi Reines stated that his support of the Zionist movement was practical and carried no theological significance. It was merely a necessity to find a safe haven for the Jews from European antisemitism (Ravitzky, 1996). ‘HaMizrahi’ was known for its pragmatic approach and supported the secular-Zionist movement in exchange for pedagogical autonomy in a sectorial religious-Zionist education system. This arrangement, which was formed in the 1930s and lasted until 1977, was known as ‘The historical alliance’.

In 1977, the “historical alliance” with Labor-Zionist party MAPAI was abandoned, and the religious-Zionist movement began supporting Menachem Begin and the right-wing Likud party. This transition was largely a result of the growing influence of the “Gush Emunim” movement within religious-Zionism. Gideon Aran’s groundbreaking research on the origins and ideology of Gush Emunim described the theological, political, and cultural revolution this movement generated within religious-Zionism. According to Aran, Gush Emunim’s theology transformed the movement “from religious-Zionism to a Zionist religion” (Aran, 1987). In other words, instead of being a religious subculture within the secular-Zionist movement, the commitment to Zionism was now perceived as stemming from, and therefore subjected to, their religious worldview. Following the teachings of Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, these religious-Zionists viewed the triumphal results of the 1967 war – the occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights – as an important stage towards the actualisation of a divine redemption process. Therefore, they began to settle these lands (sometimes illegally) in order to prevent their future evacuation in any peace agreement that would include returning the land in exchange for peace (Barzel, 2017).

Religious-Zionists came to believe that secular Zionism has “fulfilled its mission and finished its role” (Karpel, 2003, p. 15), and it was now their turn to assume leadership and settle the new territories occupied in the war to ensure they would become part of a larger Israel. Gush Emunim’s ideologists associated the reluctance and hesitation of secular Israelis to settle
the territories with a general weakening of mainstream Zionism, as the movement’s platform explained: [W]e are unfortunately witnessing a series of events indicating a process of degeneration and retreat from realizing the Zionist idea . . . a trend that is a shoddy imitation of the western culture . . . a mood featuring a quest for the “easy and comfortable life, high standard of living and after luxury items” (Shafat, 1995, appendix 1).

The settlement of the territories – areas with historical and religious significance – was for religious-Zionists the fulfilment of religious commandments and national duty. The national revival that Gush Emunim offered replicated many of the symbols and practices of secular Zionism but instilled them with religious meaning. Hiking the land, community life, Hebrew culture, and, especially, pioneering became the markers of the new movement (Ben-Porat, 2000). This settlement project, led by the movement in the occupied territories, often bending the rules and ignoring restrictions in order to create “facts on the ground”, received (at least in its early stages) sympathy and support from secular Zionists who identified with the renewal of Zionism and the pioneering collectivist spirit behind the movement.

Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook’s position regarding the settlements was based on the theological teachings of his father, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, regarding the relationship between Judaism and modernity, specifically Jewish nationalism. According to this interpretation, the entire modern world, including its secularism, is a manifestation of the divinity. Thus, due to their important role in promoting divine redemption, the Zionist movement and the Israeli state must be sanctified. This position, named Mamlachtiyut (statism) entailed some important consequences, most notably that the state and its institutions must be regarded as holy, and that serving the state and abiding by its laws are a religious obligation. This does not mean that one cannot oppose state policy, as was manifested in the several occasions that the Israeli state acted against Jewish settlements. However, in most cases the statist approach brought religious-Zionists to carefully maintain a “theological-normative balance”, in which “the state’s religious aura acts to undermine calls for civil, political, and military disobedience because reverence for the state is conceived of as a religious imperative. Consequently, the religious-Zionist discourse of loyalty was primary and paradigmatic while the discourse of disobedience faced serious intellectual obstacles” (Hellinger et al., 2018, p. 24).

In this respect, the evacuation of Gaza settlements in 2005 (“The Disengagement Plan”) served as a watershed moment for the religious-Zionist “statist” approach, and it is hard to overestimate its impact on religious-Zionist theology, politics and culture. This event was traumatic for the religious-Zionist community for several reasons (Inbari, 2012). First, the overwhelming majority of Gaza settlers were religious-Zionists. Even those who were not personally affected by the decision had friends and families that lived in the settlements. Second, religious-Zionists interpreted the disengagement as a political failure. They led the political struggle but failed to gain active support from the broader Israeli society. Most importantly, though, the literature describes the disengagement as a theological crisis. Due to the “Kookist” interpretation of the state as endowed with a divine significance, the uprooting of Jewish settlements, which were perceived as a redemptive fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham, seemed incomprehensible.

In the aftermath of these events, religious-Zionists began to increasingly reexamine the “theological-normative balance”, i.e. their religious identity vis-à-vis their commitment to the Israeli Jewish state. During the struggle against the evacuation, the settlers’ leadership sought to prevent violence and keep the protests within legitimate boundaries. Following the “statist” approach, they obeyed the military’s orders in most cases, and violence was rare and limited (Roth, 2014). Retrospectively, many religious-Zionists blamed these peaceful tactics as the root of the struggle’s failure. As a response, some adopted a “post-statist” worldview. The state is not
Religion and politics in Israel

intrinsically holy, they maintain, but rather holds only an instrumental importance so long as it advances religious goals. Therefore, there is no religious imperative to abide by state laws, and further evacuation of settlements must be fought at all costs (Harel, 2017; Hellinger et al., 2018). This notion fuelled violence against police officers during the evacuation of Amona in 2006, and more recently by the phenomenon of the “hilltop youth” and “price tag” violent incidents.6

Religious-Zionism, despite its growing power, has not assumed leadership, and political attempts to reach wider constituencies did not materialize. However, the success of the settlement project has made territorial compromise (a “two-state” solution) almost impossible. Also, the growing number of religious-Zionist men serving in the military combat units and in the top command of the military has led to what has been described as “theocratization” of the military. The critical mass of religious soldiers in many combat units restricts the military command’s intragovernmental autonomy vis-à-vis the religious sector, and the Israel Defense Forces autonomy in deploying forces in politically disputable missions (Levy, 2014), including potential future redeployments.

The rise of conservatism

Another important consequence of the 2005 evacuation is the rise of the Israeli “conservative movement”.7 Since the early 2010s, religious-Zionists, and more specifically religious-Zionist settlers, became active in several political organizations – the Tikvah Fund, the Kohelet Policy, and the Jewish Statesmanship Center. The conservative movement was fuelled by American immigrants who imported neoconservative values, political culture, and (perhaps most importantly) capital from overseas. This movement promotes three ideological themes: liberal economics and deregulation, judicial restraint (formalism) and fierce Jewish nationalism. Historically, the religious-Zionist community tended to criticize the Supreme Court’s judicial activism and support right-wing hawkish politics, but other elements of the conservative movement – particularly, the support of neoliberal economics, seem foreign to traditional religious-Zionist thought. During the religious-Zionist movement’s first stages, some religious-Zionists have expressed collectivist views towards social justice. The Labor-oriented HaPoel HaMizrachi was established already in 1922 and had its own kibbutz movement, in which Orthodox Jews lived within egalitarian communities centred on labour and social justice (Peled and Herman-Peled, 2019). Moreover, the National-Religious Party platform for the 1992 elections explicitly stated their support for worker unions and the need to guarantee collective contracts. Therefore, these ideas are perceived by some as a foreign influence on religious-Zionist ideology (Hominer, 2016).

As opposed to the “Kookist” religious-Zionists who viewed the disengagement as a crisis of faith, the conservatives were more rational and pragmatic. Their main takeaway from the disengagement was that the state of Israeli does not have a theological problem but a political one. Therefore, it is important to understand their perspective of the 2004–2005 political events that led up to the Gaza evacuation.

In order to carry out the disengagement plan, Sharon used questionable political tactics. When it was time to bring the plan for vote in the government meeting, Sharon fired two ministers from the Hawkish HaIhud Haleumi party just 48 hours before the vote, in order to secure a majority. Later, in order to demonstrate public support for the plan, Sharon carried out a plebiscite among Likud party members. Religious-Zionists undertook an impressive door-knocking operation, visiting homes of Likud voters and convincing them to vote against the plan. This campaign had tremendous success: 59.5% voted against the disengagement plan, while only 39.7% supported it. However, despite these results, Sharon decided to move on with the execution of the plan, arguing that the results were not binding.
Sharon’s moves generated a great outcry among religious-Zionists, and they began to protest the evacuation. Religious-Zionists organized mass demonstrations, sit-ins and even roadblocks, demanding to stop the evacuation. During these protests, many religious-Zionists, 688 of them minors, were arrested. The fact that Sharon was able to carry out the disengagement plan led some religious-Zionists to the conclusion that something in the Israeli democratic system was not working. How can a politician so blatantly disregard the will of his people? If within the democratic system carrying out such an undemocratic process is legal – there is a problem with the system itself.

For others, the disengagement plan was a wakeup call from mystical theology. They concluded that the religious-Zionist “Kookist” idea of the Israeli state as “the foundation of God’s throne in the world” no longer fits reality. This understanding brought them to adopt a liberal perception of the state as value-neutral, an idea that is easily compatible with neoliberal or even libertarian economic politics.

Another takeaway from the disengagement plan was that the struggle against the evacuation was perceived by the Israeli public as a religious-Zionist struggle. The secular and Haredi Jews who opposed the evacuation did not take active part in the struggles, which were led by the religious-Zionist community and had a strong religious messianic tone. Religious-Zionists understood that in order to prevent future evacuations, they must create alliances with the other sectors of the Jewish-Israeli society: The Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) and secular Israelis. As previously described, the conservative movement provides a non-religious ideological framework to support Jewish nationalism. This way, religious-Zionists, Haredim and secular individuals gain a sense of belonging to the same intellectual community.

The emergence of the Israeli conservative movement cannot be solely attributed to the events of 2005. Not all activists in the conservative movement interpreted the Gaza disengagement in this way. Seeing themselves as rational non-mystical individuals, the political opposition to the plan did not lead to a personal, religious or national crisis among activists in the conservative movement. Moreover, the movement’s intellectual roots and first institutions preceded the disengagement plan by more than a decade. However, the emerging conservative movement in Israel provided a coherent worldview, and more importantly, money and institutions, for the religious-Zionist individuals who were motivated to take political action after the disengagement.

**Populism**

Populism is central in Israel (and in contemporary politics) since populist movements emerge in societies where conflicts concerning the inclusion/exclusion of subordinate social groups are salient, and the signifier people becomes a major reference point for the constitution of political identities. Populism can be “inclusive”, promoting the political integration of excluded social groups, or “exclusive”, claiming to preserve collective subjects that feel their identity threatened (Ben-Porat and Filc, 2021). “The people” is often an empty signifier that needs content for the establishment of an identity that is more than just being anti-elite or anti-foreigner (Arato and Cohen, 2018, p. 102). Accordingly, “populist politics also needs a convincing moral claim to trigger the self-righteous indignation necessary to construct, define and mobilize the authentic ‘good’ people against the alien other” (Cohen and Arato, 2012, p. 102). Populism can be “inclusive”, promoting the political integration of excluded social groups, or “exclusive”, claiming to preserve collective subjects that feel their identity threatened. Religion can be a way to demarcate boundaries of the “people” and separate them both from “others” (foreigners) and (secular) elites.

In 1997, during an election campaign, Benjamin Netanyahu paid a visit to Rabbi Yitzhak Kadury, an important Sepharadic religious and spiritual leader. Netanyahu was caught on tape whispering to the elder Rabbi’s ear, “the left has forgotten what it is to be a Jew”. The
comment, directed at Israel’s left/liberal parties who supported a territorial compromise, was considered inflammatory and offensive and evoked outrage. Religion can perform an important role in populist ideology and strategy in delineating the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion and adding content and justification. As Arato and Cohen explain: “Religious identity politics provide unifying content for the chain of equivalents in populist logic, helps moralize the friend and demonize the enemy, and to frame the elites and ‘others’ as immoral and corrupt, and thus part of a deeper threat to ‘our’ tradition that must be warded off, while providing a needed moral aura for populist politics” (2012, p. 108).

Religious tropes are often used to delineate boundaries and strengthen the us-them dichotomy, even by leaders who are not religious. The use of religion might be instrumental and the religious identities are actually ethnic, serving a political cause, largely symbolic and having no religious content (Gans, 1994). But, religion and ethnicity, as Mitchell (2006) suggests, often have a two-way relation. Thus, even if ethnic identities that employ religious symbols appear largely secular, they may have latent religious content that can be re-activated. Religion evokes a sense of the sacred, provides specific ideological concepts, is accompanied by powerful institutions, serves as an effective facilitator of community and provides substantive content for social boundaries. Once rekindled, the religious aspects of identification can become dominant, challenging hegemonies and institutional orders.

The Likud party’s victory in the elections of 1977 signalled the end of the Labor hegemony. The party’s origins were in the opposition revisionist party (Herut) and its military wing, the Irgun, who challenged the pre-state Labor hegemony. In 1973, several opposition parties joined to form the Likud, under the leadership of Menachem Begin. Ideologically, the Likud presented a nationalistic worldview, in line with its founders’ worldview but that also appealed to Mizrahim, Jews who emigrated from Muslim countries and their descendants, excluded and marginalized by Labor’s hegemony. Likud’s demand for the inclusion of Mizrahim, materially and symbolically, enabled it not only to defeat Labor but also to remain in power (Filc, 2006, pp. 100–101). The rhetoric of “Jewish people” used by the Likud enabled the symbolic inclusion of Mizrachim, most of them excluded by the pre-state Labor-led pioneering ethos and marginalized by the Labor elite. Menachem Begin, “located the ways in which the discourse of the Labor party formed a collective subject that did not include Mizrahim” (Filc, 2006, p. 104), deconstructed the pioneering ethos and the privileges it entailed, and created a space for Mizrahim in a new national ethos.

Begin’s rhetoric was anti-elitist, repeatedly attacking the Labor elites for excluding both the Revisionists and Mizrahim, an exclusion that secured Labor’s elite status and privileges. This anti-elitism made a significant contribution in the Likud’s rise to power, able to appeal to new constituencies and take advantage of resentment. Begin often used religion and religious discourse, among other things, to distinguish the Likud from the secular Labor elite. In the speech presenting his new government, defeating Labor after 29 years in power, he stated: “We shall follow the name of our Lord forever . . . I announce that the government of Israel will not ask any nation . . . to acknowledge our right to exist . . . we have received that right from God” (quoted in Filc, 2006, p. 118). This religious rhetoric and the use of religious symbols underscored not only the new partnership between the Likud and religious nationalist parties, but also echoed the traditionalist elements with the Likud and the rejection of Labor’s secularism. However, while Begin believed that in Judaism religion and national belonging are inseparable (in this he resembled the view of Orthodox Jews); he combined this view with liberal conceptions of democracy and commitment for equality.

The Likud gradually withdrew from its liberal roots and commitments. In recent years, under Netanyahu’s leadership, it transformed into an exclusionary populist party similar
Hayim Katsman and Guy Ben-Porat

(albeit in many ways more extremist) to European radical right populist parties. Exclusionary populism was expressed both symbolically and politically, Netanyahu’s nativist definition of the people advocated a closed ethno-national unity, threatened by foreign enemies, non-Jewish citizens and Jewish-Israeli opposition advocating equal citizenship and depicted as detached elites not committed to Jewish nationality. In his discourse, the identity of the people is crystal clear: “us”, implies the Jewish people, defined by descent, against the anti-people marked by antisemitism. When commenting on the Security Council’s 2334 decision reaffirming that the settlements in the West Bank are illegitimate, Netanyahu stated, “Left parties’ politicians and TV journalists were extremely pleased with the Security Council’s decision; almost as the Palestinian Authority and Hamas [. . .]” (Netanyahu’s Facebook Wall 24 December 2016).

Netanyahu uses religion in his rhetoric both to demarcate boundaries of nationhood, excluding non-Jewish citizens, and to establish hierarchies of loyalty within the Jewish nation. In 1997, during an election campaign, his words “the left has forgotten what it is to be a Jew”, de-legitimized the Israeli left, equating the demand for territorial compromise with disloyalty. Later, religion became more instrumental and explicit than before. First, religiosity or attachment to religion becomes a litmus test for loyalty, separating authentic members of the nation from cosmopolitan and disloyal elites. Second, religious language and symbols accentuate fears and shape demands for action, to protect the nation and its borders. Third, consequently, more and more leaders, not only in the Likud, adopt religious tropes and symbols to demonstrate loyalty and garner support.

The last two decades in Israel can be described as fixated on Jewish religious-based ethnicity. This period has seen the state’s sanctification of Jewish ethnic identity and its political use as never before (Ghanem and Khatib, 2017). Different legislation initiatives attempted to broaden the Jewish character of the state, limiting commitments to inclusive democracy. The “Nationality Law” legislated by the Israeli Parliament in June 2018 (62 against 55) consolidated the definition of Israel as the state of Jewish people, enshrined the (Jewish) symbols of the state, and affirmed the state’s commitment to Jewish immigration and settlement. The law has not made similar commitments to equality and democracy, nor has it taken into account the Arab Palestinian narrative of national belonging, hereby marginalizing Israel’s Arab (and other non-Jewish) citizens.

Supporters of the law explained it was a necessary measure to counteract Israel’s declining commitment to its Jewish character, blaming, among others, the liberal and elitist Supreme Court for the decline. Exclusionary and anti-elitist sentiments are supported by broad sectors among Israeli Jews. A poll by the Israel Democracy Institute showed that many Jews object including Arabs in Israeli decision-making, support discrimination towards Arabs and even object to Arabs living in their vicinity. Many (61%) even support conditioning Arabs’ right to vote to pleading allegiance to Israel as a Jewish state, and to its symbols (Ghanem and Khatib, 2017). A poll by the Pew Research Center (2016)” has shown that 48% of Israelis support the expulsion of Arabs from Israel and that Jewish citizens of different political and social backgrounds remain united in the view that Israel is the country of the Jewish people (Ghanem and Khatib, 2017).

Twenty years after Netanyahu’s comment on the left forgetting what it is to be Jewish, Avi Gabai, then leader of the Labor Party, part of the liberal pro-peace camp, echoed Netanyahu’s remark, demonstrating the importance of Jewish identity. If the left were to return to power, he argued, it would have to demonstrate loyalty to Jewish identity and values:

People feel I am getting closer to Jewish values. We are Jewish, we live in a Jewish state. I think one of the problems of the Labor Party, seriously, is that it withdrew from it. Netanyahu told Rabbi Kadury that “the Left forgot what it is to be Jewish”. And what
Religion and politics in Israel

the left has done in response? It forgot what it is to be Jewish. It is as if we are now only liberals. That is not true, we are Jewish and we need to talk about our Jewish values. (Ynet, 2017)10

Conclusions

Despite its secular roots and rebellion against religious Orthodoxy, Zionism remained indebted to religion. Religion underscored Zionist claims for a territorial “promised land”, helped demarcate the boundaries of the “Jewish people” and provided cultural content to the nation-building project. Accordingly, a series of agreements, arrangements and compromises provided religion with authority and standing in the Jewish state formed in 1948. In recent decades, secularization has undermined religious authority, but at the same time religion was able to withhold its ground and even advances in some realms. In this chapter, we suggest that the continued strength of religion can be attributed to its role in boundary making. First, the rise of religious-Zionism attempted to replace secular Zionism in leading the Zionism movement. Second, conservatism added another dimension of politics, where religion combined with hawkish and neoliberal stances. Finally, populism, wider in appeal than the two other trends, also brought religion to the fore. Religion not only strengthened the exclusionary demands against non-Jews but also created a hierarchy of loyalty and an anti-elite stance.

Notes

1 The law grants Israeli citizenship to “the child or grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, and the spouse of a Jewish child or grandchild”.
2 According to Jewish Orthodoxy, a Jew is “someone who was born to a Jewish mother, and who does not belong to another religion, or someone who converted to Judaism”.
3 Hebrew acronym for “Spiritual Center” [Mekaz Ruchani].
4 Gadi Taub interestingly notes the exclusion of the state of Israel from this trinity (Taub, 2010).
5 Out of 21 settlements, only 5 permitted driving on the Sabbath within the settlement.
6 “Hilltop youth” is a name referring to youngsters who establish illegal outposts in the West Bank. “Price tag” attacks are incidents in which Jewish settlers attack Palestinians and vandalize their property, sometimes as a response to Palestinian terror attacks. See Hellinger et al. (2018).
7 “Conservative” in this article does not refer to the Jewish religious movement. In Hebrew, the Jewish religious movement translates as “Masorti” (traditional) while the political movement described in this article translates as “Shamrani”.
8 www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3124997,00.html
9 https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2016/03/08/israels-religiously-divided-society/
10 https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5042427,00.html

References


