

Modern Orthodoxy

Orthodoxy is the name given to those Jewish groups that ideologically reject the changes of the Reform movement and insistent upon the importance of the observance of the commandments.

The prevalent usage of the term “Orthodoxy” was in the nineteenth century German battles of Orthodoxy versus reform and in the post WWII struggles of Orthodoxy against the Conservative movement.

Yet, the word “Orthodoxy” is only included in polemical era. Israeli ideologues can simply use the phrase “Religious Zionist,” in which religious assumes ritual observance. Similarly, Herman Wouk and President Belkin assumed that the chasm between Reform and observance was so great that the phrase “traditionalism” would suffice as a description.

The term **Modern** modifies “Orthodox” to imply that the group is embracing at least some aspects of the modern world. It also implies that there is another group that does not accept modernity. Here also, the German Rabbis fighting against Reform and the post WWII rabbis made the most use of the term “modern”; the others used specific agendas to define their ideologies.

This term becomes a dividing line between the thinkers in that, for some, **Modern** implies a temporal change from the past and an independent source of values, while for others it does not, and for some of those others it cannot.

In Russia, “modern” implied broad changes to the curriculum, concern for the laity, and nationalism. For religious Israelis, the dividing line requires the acceptance of the state and serving in the army. Further debates concern the role of manual labor, messianic politics, and modern university studies.

In Germany, “modern” implied the inclusion of secular studies, the integration into middle class life, and Rabbinical schools that did not follow the traditional model, taught secular studies, and strove to create “scholars and gentlemen.” In addition, “modern” implied the acknowledgement that the autonomous community structure of Jewish life based on legal independence was over and that, instead, observance was a personal option chosen by fewer people.

In America, a hybrid was created whereby the traditional Eastern European curriculum was continued for Jewish studies but combined with “the best of Western civilization” and a concern for the laity. Originally the struggles were to accept science yet defeat secularism. Then the need for a “modern” worldview, and finally, acceptance of college became the litmus test. A major aspect of this process was the integration of the Jewish proletariat into middle class values and then, in later decades, the cultivation of professionals.

One important issue is the attitude to gentiles. German Orthodoxy embraced a quest to serve as “the light of the gentiles,” Israeli Orthodox sought normalization like the other nations or else a restoration, while American thinkers speak of tolerance and pragmatism.