

## CHAPTER 6

# Gestures of dismissal, policies of containment: From denial to discovery in Southern African comparative religion<sup>1</sup>

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The idea of a civil society, it has often been noted, is rooted in a long history of western political theory. Recently, Adam B Seligman (1992) has reconstructed that history by recollecting the diverse resources that have been drawn upon in shaping the idea of a civil society. Among the formative influences, Seligman has emphasised Christian natural law, Reformation individualism, notions of natural rights and social contracts from Locke through the Scottish Enlightenment, and critical analysis, from Marx to Gramsci, of the socioeconomic tensions between private interests and the public good. Certainly, this catalogue of influences represents one way of telling the story of the emergence of civil society in the West, although it has often resulted in a triumphalist or uncritical celebration of the dominant order in modern industrialised societies.

In Seligman's account, however, two important, and perhaps unexpected, implications of this history are highlighted. First, the role of religion in this mix has been crucial. Religion has informed the idea of a civil society, not only through certain Catholic and Protestant commitments, but also through the secular apocalypticism of the American and French revolutions, the importance of the sacred, following Durkheim's analysis, in generating social cohesion, and the role of civil religion, in the United States and elsewhere, in providing potent sacral terms and conditions for participation in a civil society.

Second, consistent with this religious dimension, the idea of a civil society can be located as an ingredient in a certain kind of moral philosophy. Rather than providing a critical tool for social analysis, the notion of a civil society has represented instead a liberal framework of moral sentiments and attachments. In brief, civil society has been an ethical ideal. During the eighteenth century, that ideal was invoked by moral philosophers to meet the challenge of replacing communal, traditional, or even primordial social bonds with individual and contractual relations. In other words, the idea of a civil society emerged as a moral exhortation for establishing a new social order in the midst of the dissolution of the old. During the twentieth century, as we witness in Eastern Europe, and in South Africa, the idea of a civil society continues to be invoked as a moral exhortation to forge order out of the chaos of rapid social change.

In what follows, I will be alluding to these two broad themes, the significance of religion in the constitution of a civil society and the social location of the idea and ideal of a civil society, while focusing upon the area of my own professional interest, the comparative study of religion. By referring to the constitution of a civil society, I intend to isolate for analysis, not a foundational legal document, but rather the practices of symbolic negotiation that constitute a civil space for social relations.

As deep background to my remarks, I must acknowledge the obvious point that religion has played an integral, but necessarily ambivalent, role in the constitution of civil society. In Aristotle's famous formula, civil society, or the *polis*, is a human space between beasts and gods. Whatever else it might do, religion is inevitably engaged in negotiating the highly-charged classifications and orientations that carve out that human space. In recognising the importance of religion, therefore, attention must be focused upon the symbolic strategies and practices that negotiate the human.<sup>2</sup> Of course, those negotiations are always socially located. Following Seligman, the idea of a civil society, as a strategy for renegotiating the meaning and power of the human, can be located in the context of dramatic social tensions during the eighteenth century that were internal to the changing political and economic orders of Europe and North America.

However, the ideal of a civil society, especially if it is linked with cognates such as civility, civilised, and civilisation, can also be relocated in the broader global context of European conquest and colonisation of 'savage' worlds. In the dialectic of savagery and civility, certain crucial ingredients of the idea of a civil society were constituted. In fact, the ethical ideal of a civil society relied heavily upon dramatic images of 'savage' opposition to civility. Accordingly, a civil society was constituted, not only by broad inclusion and recognition, but also by the denial, exclusion, or cultural containment of savagery.<sup>3</sup>

As an entry into this problem, I will be outlining Southern African evidence in support of the thesis that the practice of comparative religion has also contributed, for better or worse, to constituting the space of civil society. It is well known that nineteenth-century European travelers and traders, missionaries and colonial agents, entered southern Africa and discovered indigenous people who supposedly had 'no religion'. Practicing a kind of comparative religion, these European observers acknowledged the existence of religious diversity in the world, but they denied the existence of any religion at all in this region. Denial of religion, I would argue, was a strategic intervention in local conflicts over land, trade, and labour relations, configuring a discourse about others as animals with no rights to land, as irrational because they failed to appreciate the value of trade goods, and as lazy savages, resistant to being incorporated as labourers, because they lacked the industry that supposedly came with religion.

Given this background of denial, under what conditions did European comparativists discover the existence of an indigenous religion? By examining the history of southern African frontiers during the nineteenth century, it can be demonstrated that the 'discovery' of religion did not depend upon increased familiarity, linguistic competence, intercultural dialogue, or participant observation; it depended upon the enforcement of a local system of colonial control. The establishment of colonial administrative systems—the magisterial system, the location system, or the reserve system—resulted in the 'discovery' of Xhosa, Zulu, and Sotho-Tswana religious systems. The transition from denial to discovery, I will argue, can be directly correlated with colonial containment.<sup>4</sup>

By recalling the nineteenth-century history of comparative religion, we find hints, if only by contrast, of what it might take to forge a postcolonial study of religion in South Africa. Without gestures of dismissal or policies of containment, a new civil discourse about religion might emerge within a new civil society.

## THE CONSTITUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

From an American perspective, the year 1776 might be a good point to begin thinking about the constitution of a civil society. Prior to negotiating a written constitution, American revolutionaries asserted that a civil society was premised upon the recognition of certain inalienable human rights, including the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Of course, we should also remember that the original American constitutional dispensation was based on exclusion: if voting rights indicated full participation in civil society, then civil society was constituted by the exclusion of Native Americans on the grounds that they were barbarians, Black Americans because they were property, and children, women,

and adult white males without real estate because they were deemed to be ignorant and incompetent (Chidester 1988).

The year 1767, however, might also be a good point to begin thinking about civil society, because that year saw the publication of a book by the Scottish social theorist, Adam Ferguson, that certainly represents one of the key texts in European reflection on civil society. Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* demonstrated what I regard as the founding intellectual act, the originating theoretical maneuver which, no matter how submerged, has remained implicit in both the scholarship and the politics of the human and social sciences, including the academic study of religion. In his simple formula, Ferguson asserted that ancient primitives, the primordial ancestors of European civil society, were equivalent to the modern savages living in the Americas, Australia, the Pacific Islands, and sub-Saharan Africa. As Ferguson (1966:80) put it, 'It is in their present condition that we are to behold, as in a mirror, the features of our own progenitors.'<sup>5</sup>

If this formula were not so familiar, we would wonder: what a bizarre claim! How can living contemporaries reveal the features of the long-dead, ancient ancestors? In a mirror, Ferguson suggested, as a reflected image of the past or as an inversion of the present. The savage was both genealogical origin and morphological inversion. As a lingering image of the past, savages supposedly perpetuated ancient forms of life that had disappeared in the historical process of constituting European civil society. They stood, therefore, as unwarranted survivals from an age beyond historical memory, but, as a result, they operated as reminders of all that civility had erased.

As a mirrored inversion, however, savages reversed the familiar features of civil society, revealing - by striking contrast, by systematic opposition - the very character of a civil social order. Neither beasts nor gods, the 'savages' of the colonised world were invoked as living testimony to the ancient origin of civil society.

In the light of this assumption that savagery and civility mirror each other, how is a civil society constituted? In these terms, a civil society can only be constituted by the dismissal or containment of savagery, by the exclusion or conversion of the savage. During the nineteenth century, the practice of comparative religion was entangled in this dialectic of savagery and civility. In southern Africa, comparative religion was on the cutting edge of a moving colonial frontier that opened with dismissal and closed with the discovery, inventory, and containment of indigenous religions. Here I can only note two remarkable features of this long history of comparative religion on Southern African frontiers.

## COMPARATIVE PROCEDURES

First, although they initially denied that African beliefs and practices counted as religion, European observers and commentators nevertheless employed comparative procedures that constituted a cultural imaginary, a way of imagining and representing otherness that was constituted in and through the process of worrying about religion in Africa. Their 'inventions' of African religion can be read even in their acts of denial. Consistently, for example, travelers, missionaries, and colonial agents insisted upon the principled distinction between religion and superstition. On the eastern Cape frontier at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the missionary J T Van der Kemp, the traveler Henry Lichtenstein, and the magistrate Ludwig Alberti all testified that Xhosa superstition - which was demonstrated by their alleged ignorance, fear, practice of magic, worship of the dead, and worship of objects - stood as convincing evidence of an African lack of religion. The absence of religion, in this theoretical formulation, was marked precisely by the presence of superstition.<sup>6</sup>

However, even in that act of denial, these Protestant comparativists projected an imaginary representation of African religion in the exact terms of Protestant anti-Catholic polemic. They invented an African religion that matched a long-standing Protestant representation of Roman Catholicism - or pagano-papism - as superstition, magic, the worship of the dead (in the persons of saints), and the worship of objects (in the forms of icons or statues).

In the distinction between religion and superstition, therefore, African forms of life were represented as structural transpositions of Catholic superstition. Significantly, it should be remembered, at the same moment that the London Missionary Society was beginning its work in southern Africa, it was opening up a second front in France against the 'superstitions of Popery'. Like Africans, French Catholics had no religion (London Missionary Society 1804:510, 513).<sup>7</sup>

Even denied under the label of superstition, therefore, African forms of life were nevertheless represented in terms of religion. While Protestant anti-Catholic polemic generated the primary conceptual categories, producing the basic structure or morphology for a representation of African religion, an interest in genealogy was also evident in attempts to trace African superstition back to some primordial religious origin.

As strange as it might seem, I have found that the Xhosa on the eastern Cape frontier were consistently represented as Arabs, as pseudo-Muslims, as 'Ishmaelitish sons of Abraham', or as wild, nomadic bedouins, having their original home in the remote deserts of ancient Arabia. By contrast, the Zulu

were represented as Jews, even as descendants of the lost tribes, who perpetuated forms of life that could be traced back to ancient Israel. Finally, the Sotho-Tswana, with their sacred animal emblems, were consistently traced back to the animal-worshippers of ancient Egypt.<sup>8</sup> In these fanciful genealogies, the geography of the ancient Near East was imaginatively transposed onto southern Africa. If it could be established that the Xhosa were Arabs, the Zulu were Jews, and the Sotho-Tswana were ancient Egyptians, then comparative religion provided conceptual terms for distinguishing among different colonised people. At the same time, by conceptually displacing Africans to the ancient Near East, this frontier comparative religion reinforced the colonial myth of the vacant land, reinforcing in the process, by permeating the imagination and discourse of the colonial frontier, the actual dispossession and displacement of Africans in southern Africa.

On southern African frontiers, therefore, the contours of indigenous religion were invented through comparative procedures such as the theoretical opposition between religion and superstition; the construction of a morphology that made strange African forms of life look as familiar as Catholicism; and the postulation of genealogies that traced Africans back to the Ancient Near East.

However, although these comparative procedures were necessary, they were not sufficient for the discovery of indigenous religions. The second remarkable feature of nineteenth-century comparative religion that I want to point to is the fact that no African community was credited with having an indigenous religion until its political independence was broken. As I have mentioned, once they were placed under a colonial administrative system, Africans were suddenly discovered to have had a religious system all along. Although I think that the correlation can be demonstrated on every frontier, here I can only hint at the outlines of this historical argument by focusing briefly on the discovery of Xhosa religion.

## COLONIAL CONTAINMENTS

The Xhosa, according to all reports, lacked any indigenous religion until 1858, following the devastation of the Cattle-Killing - when colonial agent Joseph Cox Warner submitted his report that the Xhosa had in fact, not only a religion, but actually a coherent religious system. Prior to Warner's discovery, the Xhosa were credited with an abundance of superstitions, but absolutely no religion. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Africans on the eastern Cape frontier were reported to live in inveterate ignorance, as degenerate Arabs, with no trace of religion, only superstitious beliefs in magic, charms, oaths, curses, prognostics, piles of stones, and even an anchor from a shipwreck off the eastern Cape coast.

Long after indigenous religions had been discovered on other colonised frontiers, the Xhosa continued to represent a complete blank in the world of religion. As the British visitor Alfred W Cole put it as late as 1852, 'The North American Indian has his Great Spirit; the Negro his fetish; the Hottentot his Grasshopper; but the [Xhosa] has literally no idea of a Supreme Being or a future state.' Without religion, Cole concluded, the Xhosa were accordingly subject to 'the absurdest superstitions' (1852:185-86).

In 1858, however, the resident agent among the Thembu, Joseph Cox Warner, was the first person on the eastern Cape frontier to use the term, 'religion', for a Xhosa *system* of beliefs and practices. This recognition coincided precisely with the implementation of the 'Village System', or magisterial system, designed by Cape Governor Sir George Grey. In the Grey system, the region was divided into magisterial districts for the purpose of colonial administration, military containment, law enforcement, tax collection, and surveillance.<sup>9</sup> In the interest of the efficient management of that system, its administrator, Colonel John Maclean, compiled the manual, *A Compendium of Kafir Laws and Customs*, for which he solicited notes on Xhosa beliefs and practices from Warner.

Surprisingly, Warner submitted a report on 'the principal customs and rites connected with, what I choose to call, the *Religion* of the [Xhosa] tribes'. Warner was quite aware that his use of the term 'religion' was a dramatic departure from previous convention. In fact, he argued that the failure to recognise the beliefs and practices of the Xhosa as a comprehensive religious system had frustrated the designs of the mission to convert and the government to control Africans on the eastern Cape frontier. Instead of the 'ordinary darkness' of superstition, Warner insisted, Xhosa religion comprised 'one vast system of paganism' (1858:102, 103-4).

According to Warner, the Xhosa had to be recognised as firm believers in their religious system, rather than as infidels without religion, if they were to be effectively converted and controlled. In addition to discovering and providing a detailed inventory of that system, Warner, I would submit, also advanced a functional analysis of Xhosa religion. Like any other religion, he argued, that religious system derived its coherence from the functions or purposes that it served. For Warner, religion had two basic purposes: to provide psychological comfort and to maintain social order. In fulfilling these basic psychological and social functions, the religious system of the Xhosa operated like any other religion.

But what was Warner's point in making this discovery that the Xhosa had a religious system? What was *his* purpose in providing a detailed inventory of that religion, in defining its systematic character, in explaining its functions? Warner's

purpose, as we might expect, was not to offer recognition and respect, but to advance the colonial containment and conversion of the Xhosa in the name of 'Christian civilisation'. The Xhosa had to be credited with having a religious system, a coherent symbolic order in which religion and politics were interwoven in one vast system, not only to gain a clearer understanding of Xhosa life, but also to enable more successful colonial intervention. Since religion and politics were interwoven, the one could not be overturned without destroying the other. Warner blatantly advocated military intervention to 'break them up as tribes, and destroy their political existence'. Once their political independence was shattered, their religious system would dissolve, and 'Christian civilisation', Warner promised, would spread quickly among the Xhosa (1858:105-6).

Obviously, in the example of Warner's discovery of Xhosa religion, we find the definition of a civil society that is constituted, not by what the philosopher Charles Taylor (1992) has called the 'politics of recognition', but by the politics of cultural containment. For Warner, the recognition that the Xhosa had a religious system was predicated on their actual political containment within the magisterial system; but it was also a prelude, he imagined, to their further and thorough cultural containment through systematic conversion to 'Christian civilisation'.

The same process of discovery was repeated on other frontiers. The Zulu in Natal, for example, having been annexed by Britain in 1843, and placed under the location system designed by Theophilus Shepstone, were credited with having a religion at a slightly earlier date than the Xhosa. Magistrates giving testimony before the Natal Native Affairs Commission during 1852 and 1853 insisted that the Zulu, unlike the wild Arabs on the eastern Cape frontier, lived a stable and settled religious life - just like ancient Israelites.

By the time Colenso toured Natal in 1854, the equation between Zulus and Jews had been so well established that he had no difficulty in imagining that the Zulu had two indigenous names for God that were just like Yahweh and Elohim of ancient Israel. After all, the Zulu - contained, subservient, and ghettoised under Christian rule - were the Jews of Natal. They had a religion.<sup>10</sup> As for the Sotho-Tswana, although many European commentators compared them to ancient Egyptians, every one denied that they had any trace of religion as long as the northern frontier remained a battlefield.

However, in 1899, following the destruction of the last independent polity, John Mackenzie of the London Missionary Society, after decades of denial, stated that the 'Bechuana' had a religion (1899:185-86). By that point, however, as white supremacy seemed to extend throughout southern Africa, and every African - in

principle, if not in practice - had been contained within an urban location system or a rural reserve system, European comparative religionists were discovering that every African was born into a generic 'Bantu' religion. Ironically, the features of that religion - ignorance, fear, magic, worship of the dead and objects - were precisely the same ingredients that had previously been used as evidence for the absence of African religion. Contained under the same civil authority, however, all Africans supposedly had the same indigenous religion.<sup>11</sup>

## COMPARATIVE CONCLUSIONS

I end with three comparative observations. First, neither the term 'religion', nor its definition, belong solely to the academy. As I have tried to suggest through a broad sketch of southern African evidence, the term - including its definition and application - also belongs to a violent history of intercultural contact, a history of struggles over legal recognition and political empowerment, a history that, in southern Africa at least, can be tracked from gestures of dismissal to the policies of cultural containment that were underwritten by an ideology of Christian civilisation and enforced by the administrative systems of civil authority.

Certainly, other illustrations from other colonial contexts could also be cited. In Kenya, for example, the uprising of the Mau Mau secret society inspired anthropologist Louis Leakey to write a book in 1952 in which he insisted that Mau Mau had nothing at all to do with either Kikuyu traditional or Christian religion. Two years later, however, as tens of thousands of Kikuyu were being literally contained in 'rehabilitation camps', Leakey published a second book, *Defeating Mau Mau*, in which he declared that Mau Mau was a religious movement. 'What I did not realise', Leakey revealed, '*was that Mau Mau was in fact a religion and that it owed its success to this fact more than anything else at all*' (Leakey 1954:41 emphasis in original).<sup>12</sup> Under conditions of colonial containment, therefore, Mau Mau could be conceptually contained as a religious system. Its designation as a religion by Leakey and colonial officials was an aspect of a larger policy of civil administration. In many other contexts, the term 'religion' has been strategically deployed, or at stake, or up for grabs. If we are going to study religion, we must at least be aware of that fact.

Second, by resituating the definition of religion within a history of intercultural conflict, we are once again reminded of the need to be attentive to the political practice of the study of religion (see Chidester 1987:4-17). If, as the examples of Joseph Cox Warner and Richard Leakey suggest, the discovery of an indigenous religion can follow directly from the colonial containment of an indigenous population, it can also serve as a prelude for colonial intervention.

To cite another comparative illustration: the so-called Cargo movements, which have flourished in twentieth-century Melanesia, have represented local alternatives to the 'rationality' of economic relations and political administration imposed on Pacific Island societies. In his classic analysis of Cargo movements published in 1964, anthropologist Peter Lawrence, like Joseph Cox Warner on the eastern Cape frontier, insisted that 'we are dealing not with a farrago of superstition but with a coherent system'. Having recognised the Cargo movement as a religious system, however, Lawrence held, again like Warner, that 'we should seek out carefully its weakest point for the spearhead of our attack'. Where Warner advocated destruction in the name of Christian civilisation, Lawrence (1964:273-73) substituted economic development, insisting that 'we must so co-ordinate and introduce our programmes of development that the mass of the people have no alternative but to accept them as the only logical solution to the problems of modern living'. Although, unlike Warner, Lawrence did not advocate the use of military force, he nevertheless did call for the destruction of the coherent religious system that he had discovered. At the very least, we need to be wary of the political implications of such research findings in the study of religion.

Whether coercing people into Christian civilisation or economic development, these approaches to the study of religion have necessarily been entangled in the contested politics of constituting a civil society. Third, and finally, I conclude that the study of religion, if it can be resituated within the complex and contested history of intercultural contact, it might have a lot to contribute to the reconstitution of a civil society. I have suggested that civil society, as currently constituted in western discourse and practice, has depended, not upon some archaic precedent provided by Athenian democracy, but upon modern European attempts to dismiss or contain savagery, to exclude and eliminate on the one hand, or to convert and assimilate on the other, the savage. This is so whether that savage has been defined as the conquered and colonised, as children or women, the rural peasantry or the urban poor, or the criminal or the insane.

By the nineteenth century, the study of religion was thoroughly implicated in that civilising project. Its theoretical foundations, and research agenda, were completely mixed up with the constitution of a civil society. History, especially in South Africa, has taught us, however, that the civil society thus constituted was not necessarily civil, in the sense of supporting mutual human recognition, but could often be an enormous and elaborate social machinery for the exclusion or confinement of difference. Without gestures of dismissal or policies of containment, the study of religion can relocate itself precisely *within* relations of difference, relations that are not defined by the binary opposition between savagery and civilisation, but are constituted by the diverse interactions and

exchanges of human beings. There a new study of religion and the constitution of a new civil society might begin.

## NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a, 28-29. On the analysis of religion as symbolic negotiation, see Chidester (1992).
- <sup>3</sup> On the dialectic of savagery and civility, situated in the context of colonial conquest, see Pearce (1965) and Sheehan (1980).
- <sup>4</sup> I develop this argument in more detail in a forthcoming book, *Savage systems: frontier comparative religion in Southern Africa*.
- <sup>5</sup> On the genealogy of the 'savage' or 'primitive' as ancestor of European society, see Meek (1976) and Kuper (1988). The equation between the 'savage' and European primordial ancestors formed the basis of the 'comparative method' in nineteenth-century human and social sciences. See Leopold (1980) and Stocking (1987:186-237).
- <sup>6</sup> See van der Kemp (1804:432); Lichtenstein (1928:I:311); Alberti (1968:47-58). For similar denials on other frontiers, see the early and singular denial of the existence of any Zulu religion in Isaacs (1936:II:248-49) and the more sustained denials of Sotho-Tswana religion in Burchell (1824:II:550); Cope (1977:155); Broadbent (1856:81-82, 203-04); Moffatt (1842:243-44); Casalis (1861:237); and Holub (1881:II:327-28).
- <sup>7</sup> On the history of Protestant polemic against 'pagano-papism', see Smith (1990:20-25).
- <sup>8</sup> For assertions that the Xhosa were ancient Arabs, see Barrow (1804:I:212); Kay (1833:107); Pringle (1835:413); Martin (1843:187); Ward (1848:I:137-39); Fleming (1853:117 and 1856:158, 197). For the assumption that the Zulu were ancient Jews, see Natal Native Affairs Commission (1852-53:III:62-65; V:54-55); and Webb and Wright (1976:98, 247). For suggestions that the Sotho-Tswana were ancient Egyptians, see Lemue (1844:54); Metheun (1846:254); Carlyle (1878:48-49, 57); Ellenberger and MacGregor (1912:242); and Roberts (1915:256).
- <sup>9</sup> On the implementation of Grey's magisterial system, see Hammond-Tooke 1975:2; and Crais 1992:201. Although proposed earlier, the magisterial or village system of administration was only implemented after the devastation of the Cattle Killing (see Peires 1989).

- <sup>10</sup> Colenso's adaptation of this equation between Zulus and Jews began with his discovery of the Zulu Jehovah (*uNkulunkulu*) and Elohim (*umVelinqangi*) in 1982:2 and 1855:115.
- <sup>11</sup> For the standard invention and inventory of 'Bantu' religion, see Theal (1919:219, 425). For further analysis of the invention of indigenous religion throughout Africa, see Shaw (1990:339-53).
- <sup>12</sup> See Berman and Lonsdale (1991:143-204).

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B.

RELIGIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

## CHAPTER 7

# The myth of Jewish power

*Jocelyn Hellig*

### B.

#### INTRODUCTION

Contrary to the view of those who claim that Judaism is a powerful minority religion in South Africa,<sup>1</sup> this paper argues that, in the Republic, it is neither of

## RELIGIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

power nor of the Jewish population of 75 000. Lacking political power and free of the menace of host nations throughout the diaspora, Jews formulated adaptive patterns of response. Their primary mode of contact with the outside world was assimilation.

No Jewish community can be studied in isolation from the ever decisive events of modern Jewish history: the Holocaust and the re-establishment of the State of Israel. The Holocaust was the culmination of Jewish powerlessness, while the re-establishment of the State of Israel reversed the condition of powerlessness. The one cannot be understood from the other. The founding of the State of Israel, as Yehuda Ben-Zvi (1977: 76) writes aptly, was, to a large degree, the direct result of the dynamics within the world which the Holocaust was in process. Because Jewish power is thus intimately connected with its demise, almost always, almost always.

There are, however, factors within the South African situation that do place Jews in a relatively more powerful position than other minority religious communities, the most obvious of these being that they are white. As whites, they have shared

## CHAPTER 7

# The myth of Jewish power

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### INTRODUCTION

Contrary to the view of those who claim that Judaism is a powerful minority religion in South Africa,<sup>1</sup> this paper asserts that, in fact, Judaism is a religion of powerlessness. As we know it today, it was a response to a condition of political powerlessness which ensued after the destruction of the second temple and the loss of the Jewish homeland in 70 CE. Lacking political power and living at the mercy of host nations throughout the diaspora, Jews formulated adaptive patterns of response. Their primary mode of encounter with the outside world was conciliation.

No Jewish community can be studied in isolation from the two decisive events of modern Jewish history: the Holocaust and the reestablishment of the State of Israel. The Holocaust was the culmination of Jewish powerlessness, while the reestablishment of the State of Israel reversed this condition of powerlessness. The one cannot be separated from the other. The securing of the State of Israel, as Yehuda Bauer (1979:78) points out, was, to a large degree, the direct result of the dynamics within the world which the Holocaust set in motion. 'Relative Jewish power is thus intimately connected with its former almost absolute absence.'

There are, however, factors within the South African situation that do place Jews in a relatively more powerful position than other minority religious communities, the most obvious of these being that they are white. As whites, they have shared

the privileges of the white community and have not been subjected to the same indignities as members of other minority religions. Nor have they been economically, educationally, or residentially hampered. They have enjoyed freedom of religion.

Yet, their experience of religious freedom in South Africa is tainted by the fact that Jews have been subjected to more indignities than any other whites in the country. They have suffered several episodes of restrictive immigration legislation, even at a time when refuge from Hitler's Nazism was essential. They have a strong sense of vulnerability because of the ubiquitous presence of antisemitism, as well as their small size. The antisemitic stance of the Nationalist government immediately prior to its assumption of power in 1948 reinforces that sense of vulnerability. Jews seldom feel totally at home anywhere in the diaspora because they are not usually in positions of decision-making power. Their role is frequently one of conciliation. Jews in South Africa may indeed be relatively more powerful than other minority religions. However, when people speak in terms of inordinate Jewish power, they are often resorting, unthinkingly, to stereotypical views of Jews. These views become inseparable from the antisemitic stereotype of Jews as having some kind of shadowy cosmic power.

What factors are there within the South African situation that lead to ideas about Jewish power? Is Israel uniquely powerful? What power do South African Jews have? Can perceptions about inordinate Jewish power be explained in isolation from antisemitism? What are the reasons for the emergence of this stereotype? In this paper, I wish to show, primarily, that Judaism is a response to powerlessness. Thereafter, I offer a tentative groping for answers to the above questions. As the subject matter is very wide, there will only be time for brief consideration of the various issues.

### **JEWISH POWERLESSNESS**

A definition of power is difficult because there are so many forms of power, not always separable from each other, such as spiritual power, economic power, political power, and the power of knowledge. It must also be noted that people or nations may be powerful in some spheres and weak in others. When people assert that Jews are powerful, it is unlikely that they would be able to identify exactly what they mean by Jewish power. Yehuda Bauer (1979:41) has defined political power as 'the capability to influence decisions of others either through the implied or explicit threat of sanctions or through the promise of political advantages deriving from military, economic, electoral, or other assets'. Although Judaism has always been recognised as containing immense spiritual power, this

definition indicates that the Jewish people have, for a period of almost two thousand years, been politically powerless. Judaism is an adaptation to the condition of political powerlessness.

This powerlessness arose after the destruction of the temple and the defeat of the Jews by the Romans in 70 CE. Labelled by Richard L Rubenstein as 'the holocaust of ancient times', the event transformed the Jews from an independent people within its own land into a group of wanderers, unwanted guests, always uncertain of their tenure in a host country. In order to make sense of the tragedy that had befallen them and ensure survival of the people, the Jewish religious leaders responded to the disaster by interpreting it in terms of God's punishment of a sinful, disobedient people. They then formulated patterns of religious behaviour which were a direct adaptation to the Jewish experience of powerlessness.

The destruction of the Temple did not mean merely a significant alteration in the cultic or ritual life of the people, but constituted a profound and far-reaching crisis in their inner and spiritual existence. Jacob Neusner (1989) reveals how, during the next century and a half, a viable cultural-religious existence was reconstructed in the form of rabbinic Judaism. A number of elements of the religious-cultural structure of the period prior to 70 CE were put together into a new synthesis. The success of rabbinic Judaism, in response to the disaster of the destruction, lay in its capacity to claim things had not changed at all. Freedom could be exercised, but only as uncontrolled by history. This meant that the meaning and ultimate significance of events had to be reconstructed. Historical events were transcended in order to take leave of 'wars and rumours of wars', of politics, and of public life. There was an active construction of a new reality beyond history, one that focused on the meaning of everyday life. This was based on a new mode of being which was a quest for eternity in the here and now, an effort to form a society capable of abiding amid change and stress. Neusner (1989:270) comments:

Indeed, it was a fresh reading of the meaning of history. The nations of the world suppose that they make 'history', and think that their actions matter. But these sages in Israel knew that it is God who makes history, and that it is the reality formed in response to God's will that counts as history: God is king of kings.

Yehuda Bauer (1979:41) has pointed out that there has been a traditional de-emphasis on secular political power by Jews, a de-emphasis that is undoubtedly a fruit of this strategy. Looking back on a very long and

exceptionally painful history, Jews promoted a world view that made sense of their unimportance and explained their importance (Neusner 1989:272). This would be inseparable from their doctrine of chosenness.

Richard Rubenstein has pointed out both the necessity for this strategy and its negative implications. He has labelled it 'Yochanan's bargain'. According to Jewish tradition, the eminent Jewish rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, was smuggled out of Jerusalem during the Jewish rebellion in 68 CE. He spoke with the then-to-be Emperor, Vespasian, and made an agreement with him that the Jews would forswear all violence against the Roman aggressor. In return, Jews would be free to practice their religion. Religious autonomy was given in return for political power. The bargain assumed that all future overlords would be trustworthy and that Jews would have the right to practice their religion and survive even though they were in dispersion. Exile, degradation, and powerlessness had become normative for Jews as an ingrained strategy for survival. This bargain was kept, by and large, until the time of Hitler.

The Jewish side of the bargain entailed a life governed by minutiae of religious discipline which, according to Rubenstein, involved a high cost in terms of loss of spontaneity. The rabbis imposed an extraordinary level of behavioural restraint on every aspect of life. As part of the rabbinic adaptation to powerlessness, focus was changed from the earthly and the sensuous to the abstract and intellectual. In place of an altar of stone on which bloody offerings were slain, Jewish religious life focused exclusively on bloodless worship and a bloodless book. Verbal recitation of sacrificial laws took the place of real sacrifice. Verbal memory of life in Zion took the place of the actual life of the people in its own land. Jews were compelled, because of their powerlessness, to control their counter-aggressive hostilities. They were trained to distrust emotional spontaneity. The feeling side of life had to be rigidly controlled. While the mind could be developed, feelings, especially feelings of release, had to be contained.<sup>2</sup> The rabbis thus formulated an integrated pattern of religious behaviour which endowed life with meaning and gave the community hope. The inequities and inadequacies of the present would be resolved in a future age with the coming of the messiah.

Naturally, the Jews were embittered by their persecutors, but, as Rubenstein points out, they could only counter-aggress in fantasy, such as the demise of Pharaoh at the Passover *seder* ceremony or the defeat of Haman at *Purim*.<sup>3</sup> Powerless to retaliate or to prevent their degradation, they were forced to resort to prayer, petition and pleading as their primary resources. Lacking the power to save themselves, they had to look for restraint and compassion in others. Surrender, appeasement, and withdrawal became the classic modes of Jewish

relations with the non-Jewish world. This pattern of behaviour proved fatal in the face of the Nazi onslaught. Behaviour patterns inaugurated by Yochanan's bargain caused the Jews to trust in their traditional responses to attack and totally to misread the intentions of their enemy. The Holocaust can thus be seen as the culmination of Jewish powerlessness.

Yehuda Bauer (1979:24) suggests that Jews could have been rescued from the Holocaust through negotiations had the West been so inclined. But this would have involved a change of thinking and purpose on the part of the Western powers, and on the part of public opinion that supported these governments. For the Allies, the Jewish problem was only a side-issue of the war. The Jews themselves were quite ineffectual. They could not openly criticise the Allies. They had little money, and less influence. It was only through bluff and pretense that a few tenacious and courageous individuals managed to rescue some Jews. Thus, a unique opportunity was lost to the West. The context in which the leaders of the West operated made rescue by negotiations impossible (Bauer 1979:25).

## THE REVERSAL OF JEWISH POWERLESSNESS

It is clear that both the Holocaust and the reestablishment of the State of Israel are rooted in the 'holocaust of ancient times'. If the loss of land and decision-making power had resulted in a situation in which the Jewish people were almost annihilated, it was necessary somehow to reinstitute political power. This could only be done through the reestablishment of a Jewish homeland in Israel. The reestablishment of the State of Israel has normalised Jewish existence. If, as Rubenstein (1984:6) asserts, history is 'the record of the ways in which men have used power that have been deemed worthy of memory', Jews had indeed been outside history. With a return to statehood, Jews are no longer the objects of history but actors therein. The return to Zion has turned the intervening two thousand years of Jewish history into a parenthesis (Rubenstein 1969:41).

In his account of the emergence of the Jews from powerlessness, Yehuda Bauer (1979:41) points out that Jewish power exists in two forms: political power, in the form of the Jewish state and also as Jewish pressure groups in the diaspora. But this return to power was gradual and at times uncertain. The Jews' historical aloofness from secular political power makes the Jewish emergence into the world of political power all the more important. Bauer's analysis of the emergence of the State of Israel reveals the resistance, fears and bungling of America and Britain:

Any thesis which depicts two Western imperialisms - American and British - fighting for control of the Middle East is ... quite false. Indeed, the opposite is true. Britain asked for American intervention in Palestine in an attempt to free herself of an insufferable yoke, while America tried hard not to let Britain impose any such responsibility on her (1979:70).

The impact of the Holocaust was the primary factor propelling American Jewry into the exercise of political power, as a legitimate part of the American political system. Their main aim was the development of Jewish political autonomy in the land of Israel. This meant the incidental rise of American Jewish power. The Jewish vote began to be an effective instrument only in the later stages of the war and beyond. It was dependent on the new generation of native-born American Jews for its importance. As Bauer (1979:60) points out, 'no American politician cared to find out whether such a vote really existed or not; he assumed it did, and reacted accordingly'. Bauer suggests that, even together with the issue of the Jewish vote, Jewish influence alone was very limited. The drastic change from the earlier anti-Jewish sentiment in America to a pro-Zionist sentiment, could not have happened in a vacuum. This change must have been dependent on elements in the American background, as well as American cultural attitudes which would make Americans susceptible to such influence. These elements may lie in traditions of American Christianity which regarded the Holy Land, the Hebrew Language and the Zion-centred aspirations of the Jews as an integral part of commonly accepted American Christian eschatology (Bauer 1979:60). American opinion was also affected by the impact of the Nazi horrors that were revealed by the American soldiers who liberated the concentration camps. Americans were so outraged, and subsequently guilt-ridden by the atrocities, that their first impulse was to compensate the survivors by letting them go wherever they wanted.

Bauer asserts that the establishment of the State of Israel, and the consequent achievement of political power for the Jewish people, was made possible largely by Jews in the Diaspora - particularly by survivors of the Holocaust - who were the prime movers in the emergence from powerlessness. American pressure, which prevented Britain from implementing her anti-Zionist policy, was the decisive factor. It was the influence of organised Holocaust survivors, and the American pressure related to their problem, that set the stage for the Zionist movement's dramatic triumph. America's pressure, in turn, was motivated by the presence of a large number of Holocaust survivors in the Displaced Persons' camps. The American Jews kept up pressure on American decision-makers and cultivated a receptive American public. A second factor was illegal immigration of Holocaust survivors and the sympathy they evoked, as well as the grave

diplomatic problems they created for Britain. A third factor was Jewish underground activity.

## A REVERSAL OF PERCEPTION

This post-war sympathy for the need for a Jewish homeland was reversed by the stunning Israeli victory in the Six Day War of 1967 and the emergence of the occupied territories. Since then, the Western radical left has gradually ceased to believe in the picture of a small, embattled, Jewish state surrounded by bellicose enemies intent on its destruction, and has increasingly accepted the Arab view that the real confrontation is between an oppressive militarist state of Israel and the oppressed Palestinians under its occupation. This, as Wistrich (1990:50) points out, is a caricature (and hence an exaggeration) which, like all caricatures, contains a grain of truth. There has been a corresponding identity shift to the weaker party in the conflict - the Palestinian Arabs. Whether Israeli occupation has been liberal or not, the picture of Israel as the occupier, and no longer as the threatened underdog, has imprinted itself on Western minds. Even without the exploitation of this role-change by Arab propaganda, it is not difficult to present to the liberal West a convincing picture in which Israel no longer appears as the threatened or victimised partner (Avineri 1990:173).

Israel could, for the first time, be cast in the role of a 'colonising' power and be seen as a client of the United States in the Middle East conflict (Raab 1990:159). The Israeli success in the Six Day War resulted in an extraordinary campaign, in the United Nations and elsewhere, to delegitimise Israel, a prospect to which, twenty years earlier, little thought could have been given (Gould 1990:181). Robert Wistrich (1990:3) points out that propaganda from the USSR depicted Zionism as

a spectre threatening peace, progress and prosperity throughout the world ... a vast, mysterious, dark and omnipotent power manipulating world imperialism behind the scenes through its alleged control of the media, the banks, the multinationals and a multitude of other transnational organisations.

Seeking world control, Zionism is thus seen to form a basis for fascism and racism (Bauer 1990:202). This view of Zionism feeds on some of the oldest anti-Jewish superstitions in Western culture.

One of its most repellent contemporary manifestations is the Soviet-inspired myth that Zionists collaborated with the Nazis in bringing about the Holocaust.

This fabrication serves a calculated purpose in undermining the moral legitimacy of Israel. It has the effect of rewriting the Holocaust as an episode in the 'criminal' history of Zionism (Wistrich 1990:4). Allied to this is 'revisionist' history which denies that the Holocaust took place.

As Julius Gould (1990:181) points out, Western Jews had, perhaps, been too reliant on an enduring Gentile sense of guilt - which is a wasting emotion. The result has been a new disregard for Jewish sensitivities - to the extent that Jews are now equated with Nazis and Palestinians with powerless, oppressed Jews.

The obvious question that arises is whether anti-Zionism can be equated with antisemitism. This is an issue far too complex to be discussed here. Suffice it to say that antisemitism, in the modern era, is frequently expressed in anti-Zionist terms - both in South Africa and elsewhere. Robert Wistrich (1990:1) points out that, since the Holocaust, it has become unacceptable to express antisemitism in racist terms. The negation of Zionism has the advantage of appearing to be theoretically distinct from hatred of Jews on racial or religious grounds.

#### **SOME REASONS FOR THE ANTISEMITIC STEREOTYPE OF JEWISH POWER**

Since anti-Zionism and antisemitism cannot be easily separated, it is necessary to look at aspects of the emergence of the stereotype of Jewish power. On a superficial level, Jews may be perceived to be powerful for a number of reasons; such as their continued existence despite millennia of persecution, their separateness (which is often construed as secretiveness), their economic position, and their contribution to societies - which is almost always disproportionate to their numbers. Jews, according to Bauer (1979:4), have a peculiar combination of conspicuousness and powerlessness which distinguished them in different European societies. The desire of the imperialist regimes of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to dominate the world was projected onto the powerless Jews.

This could not have been projected, however, unless a significant receptivity had been laid. If one factor is to be identified as laying this basis, it can only be the accusation against the Jews of deicide. This is intimately associated with the Jewish doctrine of chosenness, by which Jews attain an unwanted supernatural vocation, becoming central actors in the salvation of the world (see Rubenstein 1966:56). Hyam Maccoby (1982:36) traces the origin of Christian antisemitism to the myth of the crucifixion of Jesus as the incarnation of God, 'perhaps the most powerful myth the world has ever known'. This myth is a breathtaking drama designed to lift the burden of fear and guilt from those who believe. The

Jews are not the scapegoats. Jesus himself is the scapegoat who takes upon himself the sins of the world. The role of the Jews is to bring about the necessary death of the scapegoat in order to save mankind from crisis. For Christianity, the cruel, sacrificial death of Jesus was a necessity, and the Jews were the evil instruments by which this was brought about. The Jews are thus the earthly agents of the cosmic powers of evil. They are the killers of God who, by their wickedness unwittingly, save humanity. But they are doubly damned themselves in that the death of Christ is not efficacious for them and because, with the deicide, they are accused of crowning a long career of sin with the greatest of all sins. They become the embodiment of evil and excite a combination of awe and hate, which is the hallmark of antisemitism separating it from all other forms of xenophobia (Maccoby 1982:36).

The role of Jews as cosmic villains in the crucifixion drama leads to a perception that Jews possess cosmic power for evil. It is this notion that makes conspiracy theories about Jews, such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, so credible. Without the decisive religious significance of Jews in Christianity's central drama, such theories would surely be dismissed by most rational people. Maccoby (1982:37) asserts that the only solution to the problem is a return of the repressed; namely, a real understanding of Christendom's irrational prejudice against the Jews and its determination always to think of them in negative terms.

Antisemitism has absorbed stereotypes which were the legacy of European history. As an ideology, it was able to subsume a variety of antagonisms and focus a whole series of views on one visible enemy, or anti-symbol, that gave it a political significance far beyond appearances. Modern antisemitism is the secularisation of an older theology which posited the Jew as the ultimate negative pole in human history. While it was originally religious in nature, antisemitism later assumed 'scientific', racial overtones. Today, it is ideological and political.

## DIASPORA POWER

Jews, as a result of this antisemitic stereotype, have been perceived as inordinately powerful - even though they have been historically powerless. With the emergence of the Jews from powerlessness, what power do those of the diaspora realistically possess?

American Jewry represents the quintessence of Jewish diaspora power. According to Goldscheider and Zuckerman (1986:172), Jews are, in almost every way, America's success story. With about five million Jews, America is the world

Jewish demographic centre, and is unlikely to be overtaken by any other Jewish community in the world - including Israel - for the rest of this century (Goldscheider and Zuckerman 1986:174). They form a vibrant, cohesive minority community with a capacity for adaptation. Though originally an immigrant community, they have become modern and American, living in large concentrations in a context of ethnic and religious pluralism.

Despite the fact that American Jews display an almost universal concern for Israel, only a small number have emigrated there. This is possible because their concern for Israel coexists with their almost total economic, cultural, social, and political integration in America (Goldscheider and Zuckerman 1986:176). With the increase of antisemitism in many other countries, notably those in Eastern Europe, such confidence cannot always be shared by Jews elsewhere in the diaspora.

American Jews are conspicuously present in a wide range of political and social activities, reacting to the subtlest shift in politics about Israel, Zionism, Jews, or Arabs, as well as to the situation of Jews in other countries. National American politics has always raised the visibility of American Jewry. They are an important interest group in this regard, but also in relation to their attempts to influence American policies in the Middle East (Goldscheider and Zuckerman 1986:185). Their political influence and cohesion are reinforced by their geographic concentrations and socioeconomic position - education, occupation, and income. Goldscheider and Zuckerman (1986:185) assert that American Jewry may prove that 'power is not necessarily a function of size; larger and more are not synonymous with better and powerful' - an assumption that is ultimately questionable, depending on how power is defined. American Jews do not call the tune in relation either to internal American politics or to American-Middle East relations.

It is noteworthy that this power would not have been possible were it not for the fact that American Jewish society is imbedded in a relatively liberal, open society, with a wide range of opportunities not restricted by ethnic or religious considerations, and which provides for its inhabitants and enormous range of options (Goldscheider and Zuckerman 1986:188).

## THE JEWS OF SOUTH AFRICA

This brings us, finally, to an assessment of the position of Jews in South Africa. While South African Jews may resemble other New World diaspora communities, in that they are a relatively young immigrant community, at least two factors

have contributed to their distinctiveness: the homogeneous composition of their community and the societal environment into which they immigrated (Shimoni 1988:4f). It was one in which a single attribute - race - was the primary determinant of people's lives. This caste-like system was later to be buttressed and enforced by the apartheid laws. As a result, the societal structure in South Africa may be described as 'mandatory' pluralism, as opposed to the 'laissez-faire' pluralism of American society (Shimoni 1988:5).

Jewish immigrants to South Africa belonged, from the outset, to the privileged white segment of society. They were exempt from the discrimination suffered by people of colour and enjoyed full civic rights in the parliamentary democracy of the whites (Shimoni 1988:5). Since the white segment of South African society was itself culturally dualistic and of inchoate national identity, the Jews were able to preserve a separate identity. As Gideon Shimoni (1988:6) points out, there is no unhyphenated 'South Africanism' - no agreed-upon, all-inclusive identity equivalent to that provided by the concept of being 'British' or 'American'. This meant that there was considerable leeway for Jews to retain not only their distinctive religious identity, but also their national identity, which was expressed through Zionism. When compared with several other communities, there is no more distinctive feature of South African Jewry than its overwhelmingly Zionist character (Shimoni 1980:27).

Estimated at under one hundred thousand people, Jews represent less than one half of one percent of the total population of South Africa.<sup>4</sup> They are a highly urban, predominantly locally-born community, clustering in the largest cities (about fifty percent in Johannesburg and about twenty-five percent in Cape Town). Within these cities, they cluster in certain suburbs in which they have been free to establish synagogues, schools, and other religious facilities. The Group Areas Act never forced Jews to move their synagogues or other religious institutions. All other minority religious communities were severely hampered by this act.

Religiously, South African Jews are conservative and traditional, the majority of them being affiliated to orthodox synagogues (see Hellig 1984 and 1986). Their religious expression has been determined by their blend of Anglo-Jewish institutional forms with Lithuanian orthodoxy, thus 'pouring Litvak spirit into Anglo-Jewish bottles' (see Saron 1965:17). It was from their Lithuanian forebears that they inherited their passionate love for Zion which, as noted above, was to grow into an identifying characteristic of the community.

No South African community can be considered in isolation from the unfortunate legacy of apartheid. While during the years when suppression of dissent

was at its most draconian, Jewish individuals had been prominent in the struggle against apartheid, this was not true of the community as a whole. In the official statements of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies since 1948, there is an inverse relation between the harshness of the apartheid system and the board's criticism of it. When apartheid was at its most crudely racist, the board's stance was the most timid (Shimoni 1988:26). This, according to Shimoni (1988:27), is best understood as a characteristic minority-group phenomenon in self-preservation. Jewish timidity dictated a policy of non-involvement in politics. This meant that there was (and is) no collective attitude to political issues; only individuals are called upon to decide. What intimidated them, suggests Shimoni (1988:28), was not so much the presence of antisemitism, but rather the very fact that the Afrikaner nationalists had consciously abandoned antisemitism ever since coming to power in 1948. A process of Afrikaner-Jewish rapprochement had come into existence, which was facilitated by genuine Afrikaner sympathy for the State of Israel. Jews were anxious to nurture this rapprochement and not to do anything that would undermine it.

Along with this lack of collective involvement in politics, there is no such thing as a 'Jewish vote' in South Africa. There are no powerful Jewish lobby groups. Jews vote as individual citizens, a stance which has always been encouraged.

While Jews have attempted to avoid any actions that would lead the government to adopt a negative attitude to Israel, their pro-Zionist stance has led to negative perceptions among blacks, primarily because of Israel's close ties with the Nationalist government. It is also frequently charged that the broad base of the Jewish community has not been adequately active in the struggle against apartheid. It is frequently acknowledged, however, that Jewish individuals have been at the forefront of the struggle.

The educational level of South Africa's various racial and ethnic groups differs markedly, reflecting the effects of apartheid. Whites have received a far better education than all people of colour, while Jews have been better educated than the rest of the white population (DellaPergola and Dubb 1988:90). High Jewish educational levels can be attributed to fact that the struggling, uneducated generation of Jewish immigrants desired a good level of education for their children. Jews have, in addition, always had a positive attitude to study (DellaPergola and Dubb 1988:89).

The upward economic mobility of South African Jews has been rapid, although it has slowed in relation to that of the general population (DellaPergola and Dubb 1988:97). South Africa offered good economic opportunities for immigrants. If Jewish urban experiences and skills were useful in America, they were

more so in South Africa. Unskilled Jewish immigrants in America were absorbed as labourers. In South Africa, most unskilled labour was performed by blacks. This virtually forced Jewish immigrants into entrepreneurial activities. Hard work, initiative, and a measure of good luck enabled individuals to establish themselves independently in business. This allowed the immigrants to move up the socioeconomic ladder (DellaPergola and Dubb 1988:92). The need for goods and services that emerged out of the discovery of gold and diamonds provided many other openings. Today, Jews are over-represented in the professions and managerial occupations.<sup>5</sup> Together with their income and residential distribution, this suggests a disproportionately middle and upper-middle-class population (DellaPergola and Dubb 1988:91).

South African Jews are, therefore, well-educated, prosperous, religiously conservative, and distinctively pro-Zionist. They are relatively more powerful than are other religious minorities, but they are not ultimately powerful. Having been subject to antisemitic legislation spearheaded by the Nationalist Party before it came into power, they have been forced to tread warily. Their response to apartheid has been bold on an individual level, but timid on a communal leadership level. As part of South Africa's complex society, Jews often feel that they are about to be caught in a pincer between right-wing white reaction and left-wing extremism (Schwartz 1984:144) - the former being openly antisemitic and the latter expressing hostility to Jews indirectly through anti-Zionism.

Jewish communal leadership is currently expressing cautious confidence in the future, and is encouraging active Jewish participation in the emergence of democracy in South Africa. Jews are supportive of democracy, not only as a desirable end in itself, but also for less altruistic reasons. For it is in true democracy that Jewish communities flourish as is evidenced by the American situation. To use the words of Rubenstein (1979:397): 'Dignity is always dependent on power .... Openness, mutuality and acceptance are only possible between those ... possessed of relatively equal power.'

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The subject of this paper was inspired by my experience at the annual seminar of the South African Institute for Theological Research on Religious Freedom in South Africa, which took place in September 1993. At this seminar, I read a paper on 'The Jewish experience of religious freedom in the South African context.' The wide range of papers shared at this conference included some of a similar nature from members of other minority religions in the country. Several participants mentioned Jewish power and regarded the South African Jews as a very powerful minority, a perception which, from my vantage point, I could not share. In the course of time, however, I came to understand why that perception was held.
- <sup>2</sup> Rothman (1978:224ff) confirms this observation. He asserts that Jewish marginality had implications for Jewish males who could only survive by controlling the urge to strike back at their aggressors. Male children were inhibited from displaying direct physical aggression. Jews generally seek occupations which do not require aggression and which usually demand higher levels of intellectual attainment. This may also explain why Jews were seldom alcoholics. It was not safe to act in an unseemly or abandoned fashion in a Christian environment (pp 224f).
- <sup>3</sup> Davidowitz (1978:273-284) confirms this view. Jews have to deal with rage in a veiled manner within their own community as they are unable to express it in the larger world. The demonic is therefore imploded and dealt with through historic analogies.
- <sup>4</sup> Many Jews have emigrated in the last few years, emigration representing a sensitive indicator of changes both within the Jewish community and within South African society as a whole (DellaPergola and Dubb 1988:67).
- <sup>5</sup> Jews are heavily overrepresented in trade, finance, services and manufacturing, and have a pivotal position in the manufacturing industry (DellaPergola and Dubb 1988:95).

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