



**Zvi Jonathan Kaplan.** *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea? French Jewry and the Problem of Church and State.* Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2009. viii + 140 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-930675-61-2.

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## **Pragmatism over Ideology: French Jews and Anti-Clericalism, 1789-1905**

Zvi Jonathan Kaplan's book *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea?* is a welcome addition to nineteenth-century French Jewish history. While a number of scholars have touched on the topic of French-Jewish attitudes to church-state issues in nineteenth-century France, Kaplan is the first to create a coherent narrative of the complicated relationship between French Judaism and the state from the Revolution of 1789 to the separation of church and state in 1905. As Kaplan's book shows, for French Jews, taking a stance in this heated political battle was a delicate balancing act.

French Jews, who owed their status as the first emancipated Jewish community in Europe to the Republic of 1791, were generally sympathetic to the republican cause, which was strongly tied with efforts to reduce the influence of the Catholic Church. At the same time, however, the French Jewish community benefited from the link between the church and state established by Napoleon's 1808 religious reorganization, whereby Judaism was given—alongside Protestantism and Catholicism—a new status as one of three officially recognized religions of France. Kaplan's book focuses on how the organized Jewish community—primarily the Consistory, which became the official representative of French Judaism after 1808—navigated these difficult waters of church-state relations.

Two central themes run through Kaplan's book. Firstly, he demonstrates that the French Jewish commu-

nity took a pragmatic rather than an ideological stance on the issue of church-state relations, which was perhaps the most contentious political issue of the day. Secondly, he argues that the radical anti-clericalism of prominent nineteenth-century republican politicians of Jewish origins, such as Adolphe Crémieux and Alfred Naquet, was not shared by the Consistorial leaders and Jewish publicists who spoke for the organized Jewish community.

In chapter 1, Kaplan traces the evolving status of Judaism during the French Revolution and Napoleonic eras, focusing on the issue of clandestine marriage as a way to examine how Consistories attempted—and often failed—to reconcile French and Jewish religious law when they came into conflict. In chapter 2, Kaplan focuses on the Second Republic (1848-51), a period of intense debate on church-state issues. While the Jewish minister of justice Crémieux became one of the most prominent advocates of the separation during these years, the Central Consistory argued in favor of maintaining the existing relationship between the church and state. In the heated public debate of the day between reactionary Catholic monarchism and radical socialism, Kaplan shows, Jewish community spokesmen developed a discourse positioning Judaism as a middle ground that is naturally compatible with moderate republicanism.

Chapter 3 traces the continuing efforts of the Jewish community to ally itself with the voices of mod-

eration during the Second Empire and early Third Republic (1852-82), as the battle between republican anti-clericals and Catholic anti-republicans became increasingly heated. In between positivist-leaning liberal republicans and conservative French Catholics, Kaplan notes, the moderate republican representatives of French Jewry steered clear of clerical and anti-clerical extremes. The position of the organized Jewish community toward church-state relations during the Second Empire, Kaplan argues, in fact echoed that of the emperor: like Napoleon III, the Consistory criticized radical anti-modernist Catholicism, while continuing to support the official status of Catholicism—and by extension, Judaism and Protestantism—as a state religion. In a similar vein, unlike French Catholics, the Consistory did not object when Jules Ferry initially introduced his law mandating the introduction of secular primary schooling in 1881, but rather successfully negotiated with the government over some of the specifics of the law.

In the final chapter of the book, Kaplan charts the organized Jewish community's response to the challenge of an increasingly radical anti-secular camp. While Jewish community leaders allied with Catholics in protesting the secularization of burial plots in 1881, they expressed mixed opinions regarding the legalization of divorce in 1884, to which the Catholics strongly objected. Although the Dreyfus Affair pushed organized French Jewry into an alliance with the radical republicans, the Consistory and Jewish press continued to express ambivalence about the separation of church and state—which became a cornerstone of the radical republican agenda—right up until the promulgation of the law of separation in 1905. Grand Rabbi Zadoc Kahn's comment on the impending separation perhaps best captures the pragmatic view of the French Jewish leadership that Kaplan's book so well illustrates: "We do not demand the abrogation of the Concordat (i.e., the official relationship between religion and state) because we get along well with the state, but if it happens, we will not be reduced to despair" (p. 107).

Readers might want to start this book with the

conclusion. Oddly, it is not until this point that Kaplan overtly states his central thesis: "the leaders of French Jewry adopted a pragmatic, flexible position on the church-state question and, contrary to the widely held view, were not ardent proponents of separation of Church and State" (p. 113). Kaplan's book would have been easier to follow throughout had this point been made in the introduction.

Kaplan provides ample evidence throughout his narrative of the "pragmatic, flexible position on the church-state question" of nineteenth-century French Jewish leaders. It is somewhat problematic, however, that he does not provide the reader with any direct evidence that his study indeed serves as a counternarrative to an allegedly "widely held view" of the leaders of French Jewry as ardent proponents of separation of religion and state. Who is it, exactly, that holds this view? Is Kaplan referring here to fellow historians, the average Jewish or French person with an interest in the topic, or both? If Kaplan means that these ideas are widely held but difficult to pinpoint to any particular written source, he should have stated this up front.

In fact, simply pointing to the prominence of such figures as Crémieux and Naquet, both in the French public sphere of their day and in the historical record, would have helped to substantiate this claim. It is certainly true that the prominence of a small group of radically anti-clerical "State Jews,"<sup>[1]</sup> in French public discourse and in historical scholarship, has tended to drown out the more representative but much less widely disseminated voices of Jewish moderation that Kaplan has brought to life in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea?*

#### Note

[1]. This term is used by Pierre Birnbaum in *The Jews of the Republic: A Political History of State Jews in France from Gambetta to Vichy*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) to describe Jews who were part of the French government during the Third Republic.

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