



# Kitap Tanıtımı/ Book Review

*Theocratic Democracy: The Social Construction of Religious and Secular Extremism*

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**Nachman Ben-Yehuda, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010.**

**Reviewed by Fatih Varol\***

Nachman Ben-Yehuda is a professor of sociology and anthropology at Hebrew University in Israel. He has been primarily interested in deviance and its impact on social and political life. In his study of *Theocratic Democracy: The Social Construction of Religious and Secular Extremism*, which was the winner of the 2011 Distinguished Book Award from the Division of International Criminology of the American Society of Criminology, he examines Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox Jews) extremism and violence as a form of deviance and its impact on Israeli society and politics. He argues that there have been serious changes in Israel society because of the increasing impact of Haredi extremism and violence on Israeli polity. Particularly, Israel has been transforming from a secular state to a theocratic state as a result of Haredi challenge to the hegemonic secular Zionist status quo.

Ben-Yehuda's book consists of four major parts. In the first part (Chapters 1 through 4), Ben-Yehuda gives basic details about his study, provides background information about Israeli society and Haredi Jews, and explains the methodology and data of his study. Ben-Yehuda points out that the Haredi version of Judaism emerged as a reaction to the challenge of modernity, secularism and the enlightenment to the Jewish tradition and

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\* Dr., Istanbul University, Faculty of Theology, Sociology of Religion, fhvarol@gmail.com

identity in Europe. After migration to Israel, Haredi Jews aimed to protect their own belief and tradition against Zionists and reformist Jews. There is no accurate statistical data about the number of Haredi Jews, but it has been increasing since 1945. While the rate of Haredi Jews was 1 per cent in 1948, its rate became 5-11 per cent in 1998. The growth of Haredi population is three times higher than the growth of the population of Israel. The rate of Orthodox Jews (Non-Haredi, but religious) was also about 9-12 per cent. Thus, the rate of religious Jewish population including ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox Jews is approximately 20 per cent.

Haredi groups are not homogenous, but they have some common characteristics. They generally live in their closed communities in order to protect their own way of life. They interpret religious texts very literally. They strictly observe religious rules and practices in almost all parts of life such as wearing, eating, marrying and so on. They are dedicated to their beliefs as an ultimate and absolute truth. More importantly, they believe that it is their duty to enforce other Jews to observe religious rules by using violence. Thus, they are religious fundamentalists, who reject multiculturalism and pluralism for the sake of the defense of their belief and tradition.

In terms of the methodology of the study, Ben-Yehuda has a constructivist approach. Therefore, he is not interested in what real is, but how real is perceived and constructed by actors in public presentations and discourses. In order to understand how the social world is constructed from the perspective of actors, he examines the content of major Haredi and secular newspapers published between 1948 and 1998 by delving into Haredi violence. The reflections and constructions of the social world through the media can be inaccurate because similar occurrences are reflected very differently in the media. However, Ben-Yehuda suggests that the media plays a major role in the construction of social reality and perception in a society; therefore, it is a useful source to understand the construction of the Haredi and secular world.

In the second and third parts of the book (Chapters 5 through 9), drawing on the reports in the printed-media, Ben Yehuda examines major conflict areas between the secular and Haredi Jews, and provides many cases and examples in details to illustrate the increasing impact of Haredi violence and extremism on Israeli society.

Education is one of the major battlefields between Haredi and secular Jews. Haredi Jews gained privileged rights to establish their own education system, which is independent from the state and national curriculum, for Yeshiva students, those who spend their time with religious studies as a result of their pressure over the state. The state financially supports Yeshiva students. They do not work and do not pay taxes. Thus, they only study religious texts and dedicate themselves to their communities and beliefs in order to keep their traditions alive. Yeshiva students are also exempted from military service. 10.8 per cent of 18 years old children took the advantage of this exemption in 2010 (p. 113). As a result of these kinds of privileges, many people have become out of the workforce. Therefore, secular Jews call Yeshiva students as “parasites” because of their economic dependency on the state. Haredi Jews believe that it is legitimate to use violence against those who aim to eliminate the state support to Haredi Jews. For example, as a reaction to secular Jews, Rabbi Ovadya Yoseph as a spiritual leader declared that: “whoever has wicked thoughts on ‘yeshiva students’ and calls them ‘parasites’ is a bastard, heretic...it is allowed to kill him” (p. 23).

Ben-Yehuda examines many kinds of Haredi violence and demonstration that Israel has witnessed in social life since 1948 in details. Threat, kidnapping, assault, political pressure, violent demonstrations, attacking police officers and violating public orders are some examples showing Haredi nonconformity and violence. They attack mixed swimming pools, sex shops, and Christian missionaries. They enforce people not to do anything on the Shabbat, a religious holiday, in order to protect its sacredness. Therefore, they try to stop public transportations; attack and burn coffee shops and movie theaters; and pester authorities to close airports on the Shabbat. For Haredi Jews, public bus companies should also comply with religious regulations: for example, all advertisements should be modest, and seats for man and woman should be separated.

Ben-Yehuda also examines underground Haredi groups such as Keshet, Yad La’achim, the Modesty Guards, Kahane’s Movement, Hamahane and Brit Hakanaim, struggling for the establishment of a Jewish theocracy. These are generally messianic, very pious and rigid groups interpreting Judaism very literally. They carry out terrorist attacks in order to make Israel a theocratic state. The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin

in 1991 is one of the most dramatic activities of the underground Haredi Jews. The murderer rationalized the terrorist act through religious justification.

In the fourth part (Chapters 10 and 11), Ben-Yehuda discusses his findings and the move of Israel towards a theocratic state as a result of Haredi extremism. In the Knesset, which is the house of the representatives of the State of Israel, the number of Haredi representations have been increasing since 1948. While there were 5 Haredi members out of 120 representations in 1951, it became 18 Haredi members in 2006. There are also Orthodox representations (non-Haredi) in the parliament. Even if they cannot establish majority, Haredi and Orthodox members are very effective power in Israeli politics because they only support coalition governments which is in favor of theocratic regulations. Thus, they attempt to fortify the place of religion in Israel by taking new advantages and benefits in each negotiation to form a coalition government. As a result, religious regulations have become effective over time in many areas of social life such as marriage, divorce, burial rites, food, and so on. Although the majority of people in Israel are still secular, secular Jews have also become subject to religious laws because of the pressure of the Haredi minority on the state. Therefore, Ben-Yehuda argues that Israel has been experiencing a shift from a secular democracy to a theocratic democracy slowly but surely. That is, while the essential elements of democracy such as free and regular elections and political parties remain active in the Israel polity, the state enforces theocratic regulations on people.

Ben-Yehuda's study enhances our knowledge about Haredi Jews and their impact on Israel society. However, as a weakness, he largely focusses on internal affairs to understand Haredi Jews and the move of Israel towards a theocratic state. He does not take into account the influence of external factors in the transformation of Israel from a secular state towards a theocratic state. However, a large number of international factors (e.g., the Palestine-Israel conflict, the Arab-Israel wars, the global pressure over Israel, Iranian Revolution) has also played constructive roles in the transformation of the Israeli state. Apart from this weakness, Ben-Yehuda's study is very informative about Haredi Jews and their increasing impact over the Israel state. I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in Israel and its future.