

**Ian Morrison. *Moments of Crisis: Religion and National Identity in Québec.* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019), 230 pp., ISBN 978-0774861762**

In recent years, scholars turned their attention to examining the place of terms such as “religion,” “secularism,” “pluralism” and “ethnicity” in Québec’s public discourse and social practices. Jews, as one of Québec’s largest minorities, as well as serving as a long-term abstract discursive “subject” of these debates have been both directly and indirectly impacted by these controversies. What, then, can scholars of Canadian Jewry learn from these ongoing conversations?

In this book, sociologist Ian A. Morrison examines how “moments of crisis,” from the Lower Canada Rebellion of 1837–1838 and until the 2013 Charter of Québec Values, have repeatedly reshaped how the French Canadian and later Québécois “nation” was defined. Drawing from existing works and secondary sources, he examines the trajectories of the “secular” and “religion” in political and intellectual discourses about the “nation.” Morrison makes the argument that, at different moments of crisis in Québécois history, “religion” and later, “secular,” were mobilized as either problems that needed solving or as potential solutions to these problems. Yet, at the same time, both the content and boundaries of what constitutes the French-Canadian nation and the definitions of “religion” and “secular” were constantly redefined.

The first chapter sets the book’s theoretical groundwork with an original combination of constructivism with Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to the author, constructivism permits the understanding of the “nation” as “(1) historically constructed, (2) subjective, (3) requiring ongoing reproduction, (4) crucially fragile” (p.30). But it only describes the *form* of nation-building and fails to offer insights on its *force*. In this framework, attachments to forms of collective identity are “rooted in the body’s libidinal drives” (p.32) to fulfill a lack. These desires produce collective investments in utopian political projects that can only ever be temporarily fulfilled. In times of crisis the “other” turns into a scapegoat who is rendered responsible for this absence. Nonetheless, Morrison warns that a simplistic Lacanian theory of nationalism can also produce essentialist underestimations of internal alterity (p.42). Collective identities are contingent. This justifies the use of genealogical inquiries into how nations came to be discursively constructed by differences *forces*. In the case of Québec, this implies studying the changing places occupied by the “secular” and “religion” in national discourses.

The second chapter marks the beginning of the historical inquiry. It analyzes the varying definitions given to the “nation,” from the defeat of the 1838 rebellion to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a society that was dominated by the Catholic church, the “secular” came to denote the “modern” in opposition to the religious, rural and

“pre-modern” state of French-Canadian society, which thus required protection. This understanding was the result of the cultural and political dominance of social “forces” such as *ultramontanism*. The third chapter covers the period of early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Morrison recognizes that the more modernist understandings of Québec which grew out of the Quiet Revolution must be contextualized within long-term processes such as urbanisation. Yet they were also the result of prior interpretative struggles in the “discursive realm” where the idea of an interventionist and non-religious state had already become dominant. He explains how early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist intellectual movements competed to reinterpret the “nation” and how these efforts were also reactions to broader events, such as the misery created by the Great Depression and the growth of a francophone working class. Although most of these movements shared their criticism of the traditional practices of the Church, they also offered different understandings of “the secular”. While first interpreted as a space for religious renewal by followers of *personalist* theology, after World War 2, the secular came to be described by *liberals* and *neonationalists* as a space in which a newly empowered state should intervene to modernize Quebecois society.

Chapters four and five are dedicated to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup>. The author focuses on a series of controversies that emerged during the 1990s regarding Muslim girls wearing headscarves in schools. The “religious subject” and “public religion” became defined as *problems to be resolved*. These issues were framed as a “secularized” Québécois society having to be protected against external threats. By then, Morrison argues, Quebecois citizenship had shifted to an abstract, secularized and territorialized form of belonging, anchored in civic nationalism and the welfare state. As the “secular” public space became defined as the realm where the abstract “political subject” (or citizen) of the state could express himself, this “religious subject” became increasingly suspicious. These controversies resurfaced after the referendum of 1995. The public presence of religion, immigration and “reasonable accommodations” were “framed in terms of a threat” that had to be “resolved” (p.161). Yet if in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “Québécois identity” had been anchored to the welfare state, “the increasing hegemony of neoliberalism” (p.169) produced yet another shift. Notions such as secularism or gender equality, which used to be understood through the framework of *modernity*, were now seen as *traditional* Québécois values and immigrants became scapegoats for the impossible realization of “national fulfilment” (p.183). This produced a “crisis of borders” (p.187) which the Hérouxville Code, the Bouchard-Taylor Commission and the Charter of Québécois Values intended to address, yet they ultimately failed to develop a proper Québécois civic nationalism. In his concluding chapter, Morrison argues for “abandoning the nation” (p.194). Exclusive secularism should be replaced by an open utopian secularism, one that would not be understood as an applicable political program or a trait of national identity but as an impossible goal to strive for, inclusive of religious alterity.

As with any theoretically ambitious study, there are strong points but also inevitable weaknesses in Morrison's book. From a sociological perspective, if interpretative work based on secondary sources is legitimate, choosing this methodological approach restrains the scope of what can be demonstrated. Yet, some of the key claims made by the author are hardly supported by the evidence provided. The absence of qualitative empirical work means the understanding of nationalism as "unfulfilled desire" opens theoretical perspectives but remains asserted rather than tested. The centrality accorded to "moments of crisis" in the construction of national imaginaries, leaving aside the salience of gradual transformations is also not properly demonstrated. Furthermore, important studies on the place of secularism in the construction of Québécois identity which could have reinforced the author's arguments (such as the works of David Koussens or Geneviève Zubrzycki's *Beheading the Saint*) have not been mentioned. Jewish Studies scholars will also regret that little is said on the specific positions that the "Jewish subject" might have occupied in Québécois national discourse at different times – Jews are only briefly mentioned in the fifth chapter. Nonetheless, these limitations are not encouragement to jettison the entire book. Morrison succeeded in producing a rich interpretation of how religion and secularism evolved in Québécois political thought which can provide useful contextual tools for scholars trying to make sense of Jewish issues in Québec. Moreover, as constructivism becomes increasingly popular in academic Jewish studies, some of the theoretical questions of the book clearly resonate. Indeed, interrogations on what constitutes the *form* and *force* of nationalism or notions such as "moments of crisis" can very easily be applied to the study of Jews.

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