Is “On the Jewish Question” about Jews? What is it about?

Marx’ thesis suggests that Jews are demanding political emancipation because they feel alienated in the Christian German state. Marx argues that a Christian state (or to that matter, any religion-dominated state) cannot constitute a democratic nation that has a “will of its own”. The leader of such state is a supreme king that is installed by the God’s will. The state laws are the “direct revelations” of the God. The leader is close to the God but distant from the masses. This distance is bridged by intermediaries that often have their own vested interests. This on one hand fragments the state into various spheres led by factions that work for particularistic goals and self-interests which further distances the masses from political participation. On the other hand it creates opposition based on theological beliefs between people that follow the state religion (Christianity) and those that follow the “other” religion (Judaism).

Marx argues that the Jews can achieve political emancipation in a Christian state by decentering the focus from religion itself and contesting, instead, on the basis of scientific inquiry and “human relationship”. Because, a religious “opposition [is] resolved… by making it impossible, [whereas] scientific oppositions are resolved by science itself (sic).” He argues that Jews can achieve political emancipation through the route of human emancipation, whereby they counter the particularistic Christian attitudes of the state by demanding civil rights and not a set of particularistic Jewish rights.

Marx also makes a case for secular state as against the religious state. He cites two models of religious states: one, Germany where a “Jewish State” clashes with a “Christian State” and two, France where the “Constitutional State” itself has a religion. That manifests religion as clash of contesting theologies and the subjugated group feels the need to get “emancipated” politically. Instead, when the state isolates itself from a [theological] religion and maintains a
secular attitude toward religion, as in the United States, the state does not impose any religious beliefs on its people and yet, being religious remains an important fabric of social and political life. Therefore political emancipation of people need not stem from their emancipation from religion; it stems from emancipation of state from religion.

When the state divorces itself from the theological religion, the political community constitutes of “communal beings” that are Christians, Jews or any religious persons, but their religion figures only in their private lives. In their public life, they are governed through their political views toward religion that are shaped by the state. Religion shifts from being the subject matter of public law to that of private law. That also differentiates citizen’s membership in a political community where they have general interests from that in a civil society where they are private individuals and follow their private interests.

To summarize, Marx begins by critiquing Bruno Bauer’s take on the question of civic and political emancipation of Jews in the German State. But his substantive focus is on making a general inquiry into how people following different religions within a state can feel politically emancipated to become the citizens of a [nation-] state. In order to cure political alienation of people, he offers macro and micro level prescriptions. At macro level, he contends that people can be politically emancipated when the state shifts its theological view toward religion to a secular view-- when the state lets “religion” and not a “privileged religion” to exist. At micro level, he argues that people are more likely to derive political emancipation through human emancipation.

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