



It's UP  
to US

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## THE RELIGION OF GROUP IDENTITY

Early in January of this year, Haaretz reported that Avraham Burg, chairman of the Israeli parliament from 1999 through 2003, had asked a Jerusalem court to exclude him from the denomination “Jewish” in the municipal register. I have no desire to get into a discussion here of the all-too-thorny question of what it is that constitutes the difference between nationality, ethnicity, religion and race. What is certain is that people have divided themselves into groups, and that enormous differences exist in the consequences of that division. Membership of a table-tennis club usually has less far-reaching consequences than membership of a country, which generally involves a passport and a fair number of rights and obligations.

The stateless person has fewer rights; it is for good reason that there is currently a ban on rendering people stateless. In other times, citizens deemed worth of punishment were sent into exile, made stateless in fact, but today we consider that as undesirable as waging war with poison gas.

Overseeing compliance with rights or laws is almost always a task of the state itself. There are of course supranational organizations, such as the United Nations, but they are not so adept at enforcing the laws, the resolutions, passed by the organization. That is why conservative opponents of the UN have compared it with a debating club.

Some kinds of memberships are, or were, as we well know, a matter of life and death.

What interests me in the case of Burg is that apparently you can disassociate yourself from a membership that, as Burg agrees, touches upon the core of one’s identity. In her essay on responsibility, Hannah Arendt talks about memberships of groups that cannot be annulled by any voluntary action on the part of the member. A membership of that kind is utterly unlike what she refers to as a “business partnership”.

There are, accordingly, voluntary and less voluntary forms of membership. Cancelling one’s membership does not automatically entail that one is thereby acquitted of all the blame that said membership brings with it, I believe that is what Arendt is saying. The cancellation must be more than just a form of reputation laundering.

With this reservation in mind, I have to admit that I'm quite fond of the possibility of terminating any and all memberships that come my way, although I hasten to add that, to the extent that suicide is a form of terminating one's membership, I am not a propagandist for the taking of one's own life.

The Jew, the Christian and the Muslim can not only bid farewell to their faith, but can also state: when it comes to culture, I am no longer a part of this, either.

We are not captives, or at least much less than we once were, of the gender given us by birth. (To the extent that freedom results in a variety of choices and, along with that, responsibility of one's own, such freedom is always a two-edged sword; making our own choices, as we all know, places a burden on our shoulders).

The Black person, the Asian, the South American etcetera should be able to say: I am no longer Black or Asian, etcetera.

Cancelling a membership will always be seen by some of the other members as betrayal and a lack of solidarity, particularly when one belonged to a minority that has been persecuted. The cult of victimhood has seen to it that membership of a group these days almost always amounts to membership of a given sort of victimhood. In exceptional cases, one becomes a member of a given sort of "culprithood".

Group identity resembles religion. Some people think that a believer's relationship to God can only pass by way of the institution of the church, mosque, synagogue. Others see the relationship as a singularly individual affair between the believer and God. I subscribe to the latter school of thought. Although I am not a believer, I consider my relationship to my own visions - to the existential issues that shape me and that I, for the sake of argument, am willing to call "God" -, to be a purely personal affair. I acknowledge my own loneliness; in fact, I believe that that particular loneliness is the mark of what we call being human.

And from that proceeds the right to cancel memberships.

It would seem to me a fine thing if, perhaps with a bit of help from technology, humans in the future could also say farewell to their membership in humanity and join, for example, the club of what we might call "goatness". This sounds like a novel idea, but Greek mythology already contained creatures that were half-man, half-billy goat: the so-called "satyrs".

The individualist encounters resistance because he is seen as egoistic and lacking in solidarity, but such resistance is based only on the fear that the individualist may be a spy who fails to make clear where his or her loyalties lie.

He who comes to the conclusion that the right to be a heretic is the crucial right, perhaps even the most important right of all, can no longer place his faith unreservedly in the religion of group identity.