New Canadian Rabbinical School Opens, Proclaims Itself Pre-Denominational

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Read all about it at the JTA.

> Rabbi Roy Tanenbaum, president of the yeshiva and rabbinical school, told the National Post newspaper that the definition follows the European Judaism of the 1700s in which denominational differences were absent.
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> "We don't think the struggle between Reform, Conservative and Orthodox is a good thing for Jewish life. We believe that it is destructive," he said. "There's reasons why during the Enlightenment these groups began, but it is important to go back to when Jews were just Jews."

That sounds nice in theory... In fact, however, all varieties of trans-denominationalism (or, as in this case, pre-denominationalism) basically amount to heroic and well-meaning forms of self-deception.

> The school will not ordain women, though they will be able to attend and receive a degree in Jewish theology.

See? No denominationalism there.

The **Canadian Yeshiva and Rabbinical School** has an **About page** that compares itself to segments of the Orthodox and Conservative worlds. (A ctrl+F search shows that the words "Reform," "Liberal" and "Progressive" literally do not appear on the page.) "We, however," the page hastens to add, "do not see ourselves as some kind of 'Conservadox,' as that would imply a mixture of the two, which we are not. Rather, we hark back to the ever-lasting pre-denominational **Classic Judaism** from which both derive."

Of course this is all anything but non- or trans- or pre- or post-denominational. This is denominational, in that it takes a stand on a number of critical issues which define many denominational boundaries. Does this new vision correspond to any one existing denomination? Well, perhaps. It bears a striking resemblance to **an existing (if small) denomination.** But perhaps not. Either way, it makes choices which have denominational valence.

I could see my way to agreeing that this vision of Classic Judaism is *multi*-denominational, embracing segments of Modern Orthodoxy and Conservative Judaism. But pre-denominational? You can't put the toothpaste back in that tube. Lines have been drawn. Sides have been taken. Either you will ordain women or (as in this case) you won't. Either (as in this case) you will embrace halakhah as a binding obligation or (as in the cases of Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Secular Humanist Judaism) you won't. There is no splitting this baby. There is no **Schrodinger's** Denomination.

At least, there isn't for rabbinical schools. Many individual Jews have paradoxical views

and denominational identities, but rabbinical schools don't exist on the same plane as individual Jews. Once a school ordains a female rabbi, or refuses to do so, it has taken a side in one of the major denominational battles of our time. An individual Jew in the pews can be of two minds on the subject, but an institution must choose one action or the other.

This critique, of course, applies just as much to liberal schools which pretend trans-denominationalism as it does to the Canadian Yeshiva and Rabbinical School. **Hebrew College Rabbinical School**, the **Academy for Jewish Religion**, and other such supposedly trans- or non-denominational institutions really represent a range of denominations -- the range which is not Orthodox. Even if one or two self-defined Orthodox students are ordained at such places, they must still certainly be considered as representing the range of denominations which is not Haredi -- unless Haredi Jews somehow don't count in the grand unity we all seem to envision.

I don't mean to cast aspersions on the new Canadian Yeshiva and Rabbinical School. I congratulate them on their opening, and I wish them all success. Indeed, my personal religious ideology accords rather well with the vision laid out on the CYRS website. Sign me up for Classic Judaism! Just don't sign me up for pretending my chosen position isn't an ideological stance in an ongoing normative argument over what Judaism ought to be -- a stance which holds its own accepted range of views to be right and various other ranges of views to be wrong -- in other words, a distinct denominational position, whether singular or multiple.