

Symposium:

A REFORM PHILOSOPHER'S VIEWPOINT

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The title of this symposium, "Can There Be a Religion in Which the Concept of God Is Irrelevant," poses a question that lends itself to one precise answer alone: whether there can be such a religion is dependent upon what is signified by the terms religion, God, and irrelevant. On the basis of one set of definitions that can be given to these terms, the answer is yes; on the basis of another, the answer is no. To illustrate: if religion is defined as "belief in a concept of God," there can then be no religion in which the concept of God is irrelevant since by definition only that is a religion in which a concept of God is affirmed; on the other hand, if religion is defined in some broader sense, such as "man's response to the ultimate problems of existence," there can be a religion in which the concept of God is irrelevant since there are persons who respond to their ultimate problems without making use of a God concept.

Similarly, there are those who understand a concept of God to be relevant only if it entails a personal, omniscient, and omnipotent providence who keeps them from harm in this world and preserves them everlastingly in the next; others find a concept of God relevant whether it entails a special providence or not provided that it is true, simply because truth is intrinsically relevant. The concept need serve no other purpose than deepening man's knowledge of reality.

We find, therefore, that the question

raised in the title of our symposium, unless qualified, leads to an exercise in stipulative or arbitrary definitions, and there is no arguing stipulations. Let me, then, modify this title to the question I feel lies behind it: "To what form of religion should those who take the present age seriously subscribe?" The present age is defined as one in which 1) the traditional scientific, rational, empirical or objective proofs and arguments for the existence of God are conceded generally to be invalid; 2) the infallibility of the revelation that provided evidence for the theism as well as other dogmas of Pharisaic (Orthodox) Judaism is rejected; 3) the primordial condition of man is generally understood to contain no innate criteria of truth so that such criteria of necessity are chosen arbitrarily; 4) the term God is admitted to have no universal or univocal significance or function; 5) every "proof" for the existence of whatever is termed God is recognized as dependent upon arbitrary agreement with the use of the terms in the proof and with the proof's premises.

A variety of religious forms present themselves to those who take the present age seriously. Two forms, however, are of particular interest in the context of this symposium, and I will restrict my discussion to them. One may be termed dogmatic humanism, the other religious liberalism. The former is termed dogmatic in both the general and philosophic meanings of the word. Dogmatic humanism dis-

plays an unwarranted positiveness in stating its views and beliefs, and it treats assumptions as though they were established facts or otherwise certain. Thus dogmatic humanism chooses one of the several possible positions coherent with the present age and makes its beliefs into a creed whose propagation becomes the purpose of the religious institution. By choosing one of several theoretically equal (so far as consistency with the present age is concerned) positions, possibilities are turned into dogmas, and equivocal or ambiguous terms are forced into arbitrary univocal significances. Religious liberalism, in contradistinction to dogmatic humanism, takes only the freedom of man as its institutional creed, and leaves all other religious beliefs and definitions to the open, creative choice of its adherents. Its institutional aim is not the propagation of dogmas but the creative use of freedom, the encouragement to its adherents that they realize themselves through the use of ultimate decisions self-determined.

Let us examine these remarks in further detail. A rather typical system of dogmatic humanism will often contain the following points:

- 1) Empiricism is the only true philosophy, and the empirical method of determining truth employed in the physical sciences is the only competent method for acquiring knowledge. Moreover, the only use of language that can be considered meaningful or productive is that which meets the test of empirical verifiability.
- 2) Religion is defined as a procedure whereby man seeks to acquire power over the physical world and thus gain happiness. If any procedure is found, therefore, that serves this purpose better, it is rational for man to adopt it as his religion. Since the empirical method of science evidently does serve this purpose better, all other forms of religion should be abandoned for the religion of empiricism.
- 3) To be significant, the term God must be either anthropomorphic or otherwise empirically verifiable. Since the anthropomorphic significance is false and no empirically verifiable significance can be given, there is no real activity called theology.
- 4) Inasmuch as the above points are true, and all other viewpoints false, the form

that religion should take is single-minded, institutional commitment to the beliefs they contain.

The fundamental issue before us is not whether points one through three are true, but whether point four is correct. Is it coherent for those who take the present age seriously to choose as the form of their religion a monolithic structure in which the institution represents and propagates the one empirical position? My opinion is that it is not. The great principle that emerges from the present age is the uncertainty of knowledge; that all knowledge is based upon undemonstrable premises, and that whatever is chosen as knowledge is refragable. A subsidiary principle, as can be seen from modern linguistic study, is that the significances of words are not absolutes from on high, but the creations of those who use them. Words, therefore, may be given whatever significance those who use them see fit. It is with these considerations in mind that I call the position above dogmatic humanism. This position takes an undemonstrable theory of knowledge, knowledge that is at best probable, and arbitrary significances of words, and apotheosizes them into the correct theory, the correct knowledge, and the correct significances.

This is clearly seen as regards the points enumerated above. No proof is possible that empiricism is the correct theory of truth. Like all starting points of inquiry, empiricism is arbitrarily chosen from among a variety of other truth theories. It is not the only theory of knowledge compatible with science; pragmatism and coherence, for example, also account for the scientific method. Moreover, empirical verifiability is not a competent theory of truth for all disciplines that deal with the real problems of the world. Psychoanalysis, for example, which has contributed greatly to our knowledge of man, is ultimately a non-empirical discipline. Furthermore, ethical decisions cannot be made on the basis of empirical verifiability. The determination of good and evil is beyond empiricism.

Similarly, the definition of religion as a procedure for coping with the physical world is quite subjective. The term may be defined in many ways. The primary function of religion historically, so far as I can see, was to enable man to cope with the internal world of will and emotion rather than with the external world per

se. The definition of religion I give reflects this opinion; that religion is "man's response to finitude," the ontal response man gives to his ultimate conflict between finite factuality and the strivings of an infinite will. It is not the task here to decide which definition of religion is more competent; but I think it is clear that in dogmatic humanism the rich variety of definitions of religion available is suppressed in favor of the arbitrary conclusion that religion concerns the acquisition of effective power over the physical world.

It is interesting to note that the empirical method replaces all other religious activity only if religion is defined as an attempt to control nature. Once defined, however, as man's response to finitude, the quest, that is, for meaningful existence in the face of inherent limitations and inexorable death, the empirical method plays no role. No scientific procedure is involved in the decision to accept one's death.

It is perhaps with respect to the term God that the rigidity of dogmatic humanism is most oppressive. Assuming that a term has no meaning unless empirically verifiable; assuming that the term God must be used to signify only a certain kind of referent; and assuming a particular formulation of the criterion of empirical verifiability, the term God will neither enjoy meaning nor other productive use. Dogmatic humanism commits itself to all these assumptions, and, therefore, banishes the term God from its precincts. Yet I must again call attention to the subjective and arbitrary nature of these assumptions. Many sophisticated thinkers who take the present age seriously do not choose to employ empirical verifiability as their criterion of meaning and truth. Other criteria consistent with the present age exist, such as pragmatism and coherence, mentioned earlier, that do allow for meaningful use of the term God. Moreover, there are those who agree that the term God has no reality referent, but who still wish to retain it for its symbolic and emotive uses.

In short, then, my objection to dogmatic humanism as a form of religion is that it is an orthodoxy, a monolithic institution that usurps from the individual the religious freedom that is rightfully his in the present age. Instead of providing an institution in which all can participate who take the present age seriously, dogmatic humanism erects an unwarranted empirical orthodoxy that forces out everyone who

does not agree, even though subscribing to positions every bit as competent as empiricism.

I consider orthodoxies, therefore, inappropriate and incompetent for modern man. Hence the form of religion I espouse is polydoxy or liberal religion, more specifically, Reform Judaism, the Jewish manifestation of polydoxy. It is not possible in this short space to explain all the details of the polydox position, but the following definition will serve to describe its general nature:

Polydoxy stands in direct opposition to orthodoxy. Whereas, in an orthodoxy, the religious institution is committed to the truth of a single religious belief on any theme of religion, or at the most, to a narrow variation on some single belief, in a polydoxy, with one exception, all opinions on the great themes of religion, as, for example, the nature of God or the fact of immortality, are equally valid so far as the religious institution is concerned. The exception not permitted, that is, rationally disallowed, is that there is in existence the kind of evidence that would substantiate an orthodoxy. For a polydox institution rests on the judgment that there is no objective evidence for faith in religious belief, and on the principle that where no such evidence obtains, the religious institution can be coherently committed to only one belief: the affirmation of its members' individual freedom.

An orthodox religion is rationally possible where objective evidence exists to support the right of those who lay down the orthodox, the true opinion, and it is not so possible where subjective or say-so evidence alone exists. Unless objective evidence can be given for a religious belief, no special authority is granted anyone. No matter how convincing his private experiences are to him, the religionist's opinions are only personal ones. The rationalism of polydoxy lies here, in its judgment and evaluation of the evidence necessary for religious authority. It is intuitively understood as incoherent to endow someone with rights over oneself unless he can objectively establish those rights. No one is installed as the arbiter of religious truth on the basis of evidence that is in no wise publicly verifiable. In a

polydox religious community, each man is his own authority, for the appropriate relation among the members of the community is not that of hierarchy to laymen, but of equals in dialogue.

The polydox institution gives to the modern religionist the freedom he requires. This is seen nowhere better than in the manner in which theology is pursued in a polydoxy. The classical definition of theology is "The study which treats of God, His nature and attributes, and His relations to man and the universe." This classical definition is altered in a polydoxy. By stating that theology is "The study which treats of God, his nature," etc., the classical definition implies that there exists a real being of which theology is the study. However, such a presupposition is not appropriate to a polydoxy. In a polydoxy, the existence of deity is not an assumption of theology but a conclusion to be reached if the evidence so warrants. There are members of the polydox institution who conclude out of their freedom that there is no reality referent for the term God. Yet in a polydoxy their study in arriving at this conclusion is considered their investigation of God. Accordingly, theology in the poly-

dox institution is defined as, "The study which treats of the meaning of the word God."

No matter the conclusion arrived at with respect to the word God, the activity pursued in the course of the investigation is theology. The polydox institution differs sharply from dogmatic humanism in its theological procedure. Whereas the latter lays down institutional decisions with respect to the significance or lack of significance of the word God, the method to be employed in determining whether the significance is verifiable, and the conclusion concerning God that is to be drawn, the former defines theology in a sufficiently broad manner to include the activity pursued by every person of the present age in deciding his use of the word God. The method of verification to be employed in theology is left to individual choice by the polydox institution, as is the significance, meaning, and use of the word God. As a polydoxy, Reform Judaism does include the "humanistic" position as one of its possibilities, but likewise as a polydoxy, Reform has no place for institutional dogmatism. Orthodoxies of the left and right are both incoherent for those who take seriously the present age and the freedom implicit in it.