

Authority and Religion: The Jewish Philosophy of Alvin J. Reines

“When you’re working toward a vision that’s firmly grounded in your values, when you are truly passionate about what you do, you will be capable of astounding creativity with massive impact...Staying true to your vision and your values is how you can change the world...[B]eing a healer...[is] about meeting people where they are.”

*Keynote address of U.S. Surgeon General Vice Admiral Vivek Murthy, M.D.,
to graduates of the Medical University of South Carolina, May 15, 2015.*

In May 1964, a few months before I came to the United States to study at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, a cover article in *Look Magazine* dealt with “The Vanishing American Jew.” That magazine no longer exists, but for Jews in the U.S. and elsewhere the implied question remains: In a time when it is convincingly clear that the world of our grandchildren and their progeny will be vastly different from the world of our grandparents and their predecessors—*how can Jewish identity be maintained and even be strengthened?*

Consider how the world has changed and continues to do so. My parents and grandparents were German Jewish refugees. I was born during the War in 1942. My brother was born in late 1945. We grew up in a country that was becoming increasingly and overtly racist. After the European Holocaust, Israel unbelievably became an independent State in 1948. During the Cold War, British and other European empires disintegrated as the power of the United States of America grew. Every decade has seen incredible upheavals.

This period (1945-2015) has also seen Progressive/Liberal/Reform Judaism flourish and expand in numbers, global impact and decidedly in its programs and activities. Reform Jewish leadership has been vitally important in so many fields that no listing can be fair or complete. Yet it is important to note the manifest role (especially during these decades) of many Reform Jewish leaders in

- Holocaust research and commemoration;
- founding and supporting modern Israel;
- continually connecting with our ancestral land, its people, and the Hebrew language;
- ordaining women and guiding our disparate communities towards more egalitarian religious practices;
- inter-religious dialogue and occasional partnerships;
- outreach programs of many varieties;

- the ongoing struggle for full legal and civil rights for all;
- establishing D.C.s Religious Action Center (RAC) and similar organizations in Israel and elsewhere;
- innovative critical study of Talmudic and other traditional rabbinic texts;
- a major renaissance of Jewish art, music, and literature;
- the proliferation of Jewish studies at many universities;
- and much more.

Perhaps such massive changes over the last seven decades are best described with imagery first used by the Greek Heraclitus some twenty-five hundred years ago: “Everything changes and nothing remains still—we cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters are continually flowing in.”

On a more personal level, let me begin by affirming my good fortune to be a Reform Jewish rabbi. In 1945 my parents were among the first fifty members of Temple Israel—the Cape Town Jewish Reform Congregation. In the late 1940’s when there were few multi-generational families in the congregation, on Simchat Torah Rabbi David Sherman (a 1934 graduate of Cincinnati’s Hebrew Union College) introduced a new ceremony now often called “the Chain of Jewish Tradition.” In front of the open ark, my grandfather Richard Holz held a Torah scroll, and passed it to my father Erich Holz, who then passed it to his two young sons (me and my brother).

The prayerbook used by Rabbi Sherman in Cape Town’s Temple Israel was the 1940 edition of the *Union Prayerbook*, part I. And the content of Torah as an ever expanding body of religious instruction was well summarized as “...may we see and welcome all truth, whether shining from the annals of ancient revelations or reaching us through the seers of our own time...” (34).

As we have seen, over the last 70 years Reform Judaism has not been static. During these decades, my brother and I have followed different yet parallel paths in pursuing truth: My main interests focussed on history, psychology, and the study of ancient Hebrew texts, and I became a rabbi; he was more drawn to the sciences, and he obtained a Master’s degree in Nuclear Physics. But to this day my brother and I as Reform Jews still remain the individuals who, having received Torah from earlier generations, clasp it and pass it on. Certainly, each Torah scroll is unique and our human understanding of Torah both expands and deepens with the circumstances of time and place. Yet, the Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish religious identity that it both exemplifies and symbolizes remains with my brother and me in all that we do and are.

Meaningful Jewish survival matters. The nostalgia of an ethnic or tribal identity may appeal to some. But in a rapidly changing world, to me it has always seemed beyond question that religious identity is the true core of what it means to be a Jew and to receive and transmit Torah.

Thus, in September 1964, at the age of 22, I became a rabbinical student at the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). And I was ordained as a Reform rabbi in 1970. Now in my retirement, when I review the many decades of my serving in South Africa and the U.S. as a congregational rabbi, teacher, youth group and camp advisor, hospital, prison and crisis chaplain (while being married to my best friend and helping raise three daughters to productive adulthood), I feel indeed fortunate. Certainly, the 40 years of my active rabbinate have not lacked problems and crises, stresses and turmoil, false starts and regrettable mistakes. Yet, knowing how I started, I must affirm that somehow I have thus far succeeded in both receiving and transmitting Torah, the deeply rooted yet open-ended religious content so central to Jewish continuance.

I feel strongly the incongruity of my upbeat, positive perspective at a time when many thoughtful colleagues express real anxiety about the future of our Reform Jewish institutions. In spite of all the notable achievements of Reform Jewish leaders listed earlier—the numbers of Jews regularly attending daily, Shabbat and festival worship services remain small; many synagogues are experiencing decline, and the ranks of religiously unaffiliated Jews continue to grow. These trends seem to indicate that—for growing numbers of Jews who live in a free and largely affluent society—being a member of a synagogue or Jewish congregation is no longer of central importance.

We know that at least since the Romans destroyed the sacrificial Temple in Jerusalem some two thousand years ago, the synagogue (Beit HaKnesset, “meeting place”) has been the symbolic expression and pivotal organization of most Jewish communities. So, trends that suggest a decline of support for and membership in Jewish congregations are of momentous importance. They raise fundamental questions, such as: Do we Jews still need synagogues, or have they become largely superfluous and irrelevant? Who accurately represents the Jewish community? And, where are we Jews headed? Like the ancient sacrificial priestly community of the Sadducees, or the once flourishing Karaite Jewish community, is our Progressive/Liberal/Reform version (of what being Jewish means) declining in relevance, withering and doomed to extinction?

For some contemporary rabbis, educators and other leaders the most constructive response to such questions is to retreat to the forms and substance, the customs and teachings of our Jewish communal past, an attempt to return 21st century Jews to the “old-time religion.” Such

attempts may frequently arise out of a sense of admiration for and loyalty to the great past. While no one would deny the authentic Jewishness of either traditional rabbinic thought and practice or the pull of ethnic loyalty, such efforts have minimal success in meeting the religious needs of 21st century Jews. And they are unlikely to reverse the trends of decline. Except for the rigidly Orthodox, most women and men today are unable to identify with a message that runs so much counter to the realities of modern life. More of the same-old same-old will not answer.

Proverbs 29:18 reminds us: “Where there is no vision [Chazon] the people perish.” If synagogues and other Jewish religious organizations have no clear understanding of their reason for being, and if the only religious future that today’s Reform Jewish leaders can conceive of is an attempted resurrection of the past, then—for all its many historical achievements—the Jewish future looks bleak. And organized Reform Judaism, now more than 200 years old, although doing much of value, is unable to focus on truths that are essential for significant Jewish continuance. As publicly presented, much of Reform Judaism’s outlook seems to resemble the disorder of a person’s vision known as macular degeneration, whereby one sees well what is peripheral, but not what is central.

As a constructive alternative to religious regression, our Reform Jewish leaders would do well to revisit and re-examine the teachings and polydox philosophy of Alvin J. Reines. Certainly anyone seriously concerned about religion and Jewish continuance would do well to consider the writings and thought of this Reform rabbi who for many decades was Professor of Jewish Thought at the Cincinnati campus of HUC-JIR.

Perhaps more than any other teacher at the seminary, Rabbi Reines had a clear vision of Reform Judaism and its task of helping individuals find meaning, a perspective that directly and with fresh ideas addressed the challenges and disruptive changes of our time. So, in the preface to his 1987 book *Polydoxy*, he wrote: “In the course of pursuing research for a doctorate, and in my early years of teaching philosophy at a Liberal (Reform) Jewish seminary, I became convinced that a fundamentally new form of religion was in the process of evolving out of the authoritarian orthodox and fundamentalist religions traditional in the Western world. Exploring the nature of this new form of religion has been a lifelong interest of mine” (12).

It is worth noting that Reines did not create such a new form of religion. Rather, as a trained philosopher, he carefully recorded what he had noticed and began to explore its novel implications. For Dr. Reines, such explorations of religious beliefs, ethics and their symbolic expressions were neither simple nor easy. They took much effort over many years. He compared the often uncomfortable, painful and lengthy process of changing one’s perceptions to

the phenomenon we call “culture shock.” But he felt it his unavoidable responsibility to describe reality and investigate some of its implications. Rabbi Reines was convinced that seeing the world as it continues to evolve is more likely to be helpful than constantly striving to live in a safe cocoon that exists only in the realm of fantasy and make-believe.

It was in this vein, in a Consecration sermon delivered in Cincinnati on the evening before the rabbinic class of 1966 was to be ordained, that Professor Reines spoke about “The Future and the Holy.” Specifically, he said: “For those who take the future as holy, there is wasteful tragedy in the position of those who resist its coming...[O]nly those engaged in compassionate and sympathetic dialogue with the future can realize the promise for good it brings. The beliefs of the future may be uncomfortable, the symbolism strange, and the morality new, but the faces of the future should be familiar—they are the faces of our children.”

Rabbi Reines then stated: “There can be no religion more appropriate than Reform Judaism for the belief that the future is holy. Reform Judaism, the child of change, has incorporated within itself the acceptance of change...[N]o greater good can be conceived than its abiding ideals: the freedom of the individual and his [or her] right to creativity and authenticity.” Addressing the future rabbis, he concluded that these ideals “give you the power to envision new truths and realities, the right to fashion new attitudes and responses, the charge to continue the creation of Reform Judaism.”

Thus, in the interest of strengthening and rejuvenating what Alvin Reines referred to as “the Jewish religious enterprise,” it is appropriate to review the facts that his research confirmed, as well as the fresh Jewish and religious insights that his philosophical training disclosed.

As we will see, his starting assumptions—the factual basis from which he derived what became an overall religious philosophy—included these characteristic themes:

- the well-documented historical discontinuities between the various religions of our Hebrew/Israelite/Jewish past;
- the uncertainty and consequent fallibility of all human knowledge;
- an inherent human conflict that he called “finitude”;
- a persistent human search for ultimate meaning;
- diversity of belief and practice both within Judaism and in every long-standing religious community.

Beyond these facts that Dr. Reines assumed, it is also fair to note his personal bias (one that I share): In a radically evolving world, he passionately wanted religious institutions to be relevant

and the Jewish community to continue to be of great value to its members. So it was that this philosopher proceeded logically and carefully from the known to the unknown, from the theoretical to the practical, and from the more objective to the inevitably more personal and subjective.

This article attempts to provide an overview of Alvin Reines's thinking in two interrelated areas. Such a summary omits much and in no way captures the breadth, richness and subtlety of his thinking, with his meticulously chosen language. Briefly stated, the component parts of Rabbi Reines's perspective that have been particularly valuable to me as a Reform rabbi have been:

- A. Who has religious authority?
- B. What is "religion" and what is the unique province of religious institutions?

A. Who has religious authority?

As a Jew proficient in the "Western," post-Cartesian philosophical tradition, Dr. Reines found the issue of right or authority to be of primary importance for Reform Judaism and its analogues. To begin examining this question he asked his students to consider a thought experiment: If there were only two people in the world, both of them adults, would either one of them have the right (or authority) to compel the other as to her or his beliefs, values and actions? Our concern here is specifically *religious* beliefs, values and actions.

It seems clear that in such a situation, each individual has an equal right to his or her beliefs, values and actions; and the mere fact that there are millions of Jews and billions of people on our planet does not change this right. Short of brute force to compel obedience, in societies largely shaped by Jewish, Christian, or Muslim thought, there is only one religious argument that has been meaningfully used to deny the individual's authority over her/himself.

In effect then, with regard to authority, we have two distinct types of religion:

1. One type of religion makes these two basic points: (a) the premise of the thought experiment is false. There never are only two people. God, the Creator of the world, pre-existed any people and created human beings—and therefore (as their Creator) has the right (authority) to tell people how to live their lives; and (b) God (not only has the right, but in fact) has revealed to us—told us—in the precise words of Scripture [i.e., Torah for Jews] exactly what is true, good and how we should live.

So, from this religious perspective that may legitimately be described as authoritarian, individuals have no right to decide their own beliefs, values and actions. And the only valid choice is: are we going to obey our Creator's word or not? [i.e., are we going to be "good" or "bad"??]

Examples of this one type of religion include: Orthodox Judaism in its different varieties (such as Chasidism), as well as various similar authoritarian groupings within Christianity, Islam and other world religions.

2. The second type of religion starts out with the understanding that Scripture [Torah] is, at least in part, the work of human beings. If Scripture is understood as being created *entirely* by human beings, then—because all human beings are fallible, i.e., they may be mistaken—it follows that Scripture is fallible. However, if Scripture is understood as being *partly* created by human beings, then it becomes more complicated: in theory, those parts of Scripture revealed to us by God would be understood as binding and obligatory for us. But those parts written by human beings would be understood as not binding.

The question then becomes: who decides which Scriptural parts are by God and which by human beings? And the obvious answer is that we fallible human beings decide. Once one accepts that any part of Scripture is of human origin, then in practice it allows us to see that all Scripture is fallible and not binding. Consequently in the absence of certainty, individuals have a right to decide for themselves their own beliefs, values, actions and practices (for example, regarding God, death, afterlife, etc.). Thus—in Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, Liberal, Progressive, Humanistic or other such varieties of Judaism—individuals have the right to decide. This also similarly applies to other religious communities once they have accepted that they do not have the Creator’s infallible revelation.

As a result, in any group of people such as a synagogue, there not only exists a diversity of beliefs, values, and actions, but—as we today live in a rapidly changing world—this diversity is appropriate, legitimate, and fundamentally healthy. Dr. Reines coined the word “polydoxy” to describe such a group that warmly and openly welcomes the diversity that follows from individual autonomy.

It is important to note that the fallibility of all human knowledge and the diversity that follows are objective realities of our modern world, and strongly reinforced both by careful, scholarly and detailed analysis of Scripture that demonstrates an assortment of authors and editors—as well as a carefully documented historical and contemporary range of Jewish perspectives. Examples include prophet vs priest; Rabbinic vs Karaite Judaism; the differing Judaisms of Cabalistic Chasidim vs that of Mitnagdim, etc. The logical consequences that follow are well denoted by the term polydoxy: religious uncertainty abounds. To thrive in a world where unavoidably individuals may see the world differently, the overall task of a religious community is to educate, support and help rather than to dictate and judge.

In our time, the “spread of democracy and participatory governance has become a shared aspiration, if not a universal reality” (Henry Kissinger, p. 362, *World Order*, Penguin Press, New York, 2014). Where once nations rejected the previously supposed divine rule of kings—and along the way slowly learned to avoid chaos by building democracies, mass societies that affirm the rights of individuals to make their own choices; so too religious groupings are rejecting the previously assumed divine and therefore authoritative rule of religious leaders—and along the way are gradually hatching polydoxies, religious communities built upon the individual’s self-authority and personal freedom. As structures to avoid societal or religious chaos both democracy and polydoxy follow from an awareness of human fallibility and diversity. The rejection of dictatorships, with its accompanying if only tortuously emerging democracy, is not simple or easy. Similarly, the rejection of authoritarian religions, with the accompanying move towards polydoxy, is neither inevitable, straightforward nor easy. But, as ways of organizing a diverse population, both democracy and polydoxy are of vital importance, each ultimately capable of strengthening the other.

However, while over the last few centuries billions of people have come to welcome democratic politics (with all its flaws) as generally fairer and more practical than authoritarian governance, any parallel advance of religious communities towards full acceptance of individual self-rule and personal freedom remains much slower. In part, this is because change is always hard, and the first (authoritarian) type of religious community is long-established and widely known. But, more to the point, few have paused to consider what religion essentially is. Let us now consider the second core component of Alvin Reines’s perspective:

B. What is “religion” and what is the unique province of religious institutions?

In the absence of certainty, diverse definitions of religion are possible. More traditional formulations of religion such as “obeying God’s revealed word” tend to become irrelevant if we cannot distinguish between what is God’s revealed will and the possibly distorted judgments of individuals.

In the language of the Introduction to the recent Reform Jewish siddur *Mishkan T’filah*: “In any worship setting, people have diverse beliefs. The challenge of a single liturgy is to be not only multi-vocal, but poly-vocal...Theologically, the liturgy needs to include many perceptions of God: the transcendent, the naturalist, the mysterious, the partner, the evolving God...The ethic of inclusivity means awareness of and obligation to others rather than self fulfillment.”

Such language clearly implies the reality of polydoxy in the Reform Jewish community. But it also simultaneously undermines the essential core of a polydox community by mistakenly distinguishing between “the ethic of inclusivity” and “self fulfillment.” True inclusivity seeks the self-fulfillment and personal integrity of all within the community.

Accepting the fallibility of all human knowledge, a clearer and broader understanding of religion would support rather than oppose each person’s religious identity. Alvin Reines presented such a definition from the clear perspective of a religious community in which every person is entitled to his or her own beliefs, values and actions.

He defined religion as “the human person’s response to the conflict of finitude.” This is worth examining in greater detail. Dr. Reines arrived at this formulation through both introspection and observation. Explaining this definition, he discussed what we might visualize as a polygon having three sides, i.e., a triangle of intimately connected features which together form a crucial human conflict:

1. our limits (“finity”)
2. our fervent desires not to be limited (“infinite desire”)
3. our awareness of this internal conflict (“finitude”).

Feature 1: “finity”

Every human aspect or ability is limited.

- Our knowledge is limited: witness the well-documented fallibility of even the greatest scientific and medical minds;
- Our emotional insecurity is clear in our abiding need for the esteem, affection and love of others. One may feel lonely even when with others.
- Each one of our senses, including sight and hearing, falls short of our expectations, and our bodies are subject to unanticipated illnesses and ailments. At every life-stage we are repeatedly reminded of our physical vulnerability.
- Our ability to control others and events is always limited and beyond our reach (“the best laid plans...”)
- And, of course, our very existence is limited. Everybody dies.

Feature 2: “infinite desire”

In every way that we experience ourselves as limited, we fervently hanker for what we cannot have or be: certainty, security, invulnerability, control and endless life.

Feature 3: “finitude”

As beings who are self-aware, we know that our desires conflict with our experienced realities. As a result, we don’t want to be what we know ourselves to be. On some level, not always consciously, we don’t want to be who we are.

If this triangular conflict (which Dr. Reines called “finitude”) is not responded to and resolved, life becomes drained of meaning, an endless nightmare, what Bertrand Russell referred to as “the dreary exile of the actual world.” “Religion” is thus defined as “the human person’s response to finitude.” And the function of “religion” is to provide the kind of response to the conflict of finitude that enables a person to resolve the conflict and thereby attain a state of ultimate meaningful existence that the conflict’s negative moods would otherwise destroy” (*Polydoxy*, p. 63).

Alvin Reines demonstrated how every historical and contemporary variety of Judaism and every known variety of religion is included in this definition of religion; and also how certain other human behaviors such as drug addiction, alcoholism, and suicide, however seemingly dysfunctional, are also responses to this inherent human conflict. For human beings, religion (i.e., responding to the conflict of finitude) is anything but trivial. Rather it is as natural, largely unconscious, and unavoidable as breathing.

Clearly, some responses will be more constructive for oneself and for others than other responses. As this conflict is internal, subjective and inevitably within our human minds [i.e., intrapsychic], historically the most helpful ways of responding have involved the usually lengthy process of internalizing certain beliefs about ourselves, our world and what we mean by the word “God” (*Polydoxy*, pp. 62-76.) With clinical precision Professor Reines analyzed the range of possible responses.

He discerned four possible kinds of responses to our human dilemma:

1. Infinite personal responses: For some, “the perception that the human person is finite...stems from illusory, partial knowledge.” If we seriously internalize this perception of ourselves as infinite and forever within the Infinite, then the “dreariness” of our everyday experiences can be seen as unreal and we inhabit a world of endless wonder. This belief is widespread in Jewish Cabalistic beliefs as well as several varieties of “Eastern” religions. Some philosophers and scientists such as Spinoza and Einstein have also clearly identified with this perspective. If the Infinite One is the only enduring reality, then scientists who explore the real world are actually theologians seeking ultimate truth.

2. Infinite relational responses: For others, our perceptions of being finite are real, but “there exists an infinitely perfect personal deity [God].” If we believe and do as we personally feel commanded, then this deity will providentially care for us both in this life and after death. This God’s infinite care will insure that our human limitations will be overcome and are ultimately irrelevant. If, through careful study and the guidance of others, we become convinced of its enduring truth, then as long as we obey what we believe to be God’s word our human finity becomes irrelevant:

- And, of course, our very existence is limited. Everybody dies.
- Our human knowledge may be uncertain, but Scripture [Torah] provides us with a large measure of truth and certainty.
- Emotionally we need never feel alone or insecure, because we are never really alone; God is always present and with us.
- Although all our human powers are severely limited, God—who is all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal and all-good—cares for each one of us and ensures that goodness and justice ultimately prevail, if not in this life then beyond death, in Life Eternal.

These beliefs are well-established in several varieties of the first (authoritarian) type of religion discussed earlier—including Orthodox Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Provided one accepts the uncertainty of our human knowledge and does not seek to impose these beliefs on others, individuals finding meaning in such traditional beliefs are legitimately welcomed in a community that is open to diversity.

3. Finite responses: And for others, in the process of growing up, they come to appreciate that even with all our limitations—uncertainty, loneliness, flawed abilities and powers, and ultimately death—our lives can yet be meaningful and that finity is an enduring component of reality. With sustained effort we can move beyond unrealistic desires towards the affirmation that we and our actions matter. With loving relationships and human efforts that lead to a better world we limited human beings may never achieve perfection, but we can experience our efforts as truly worthwhile.

Such beliefs are found in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes (Kohélet). See, for instance chapter 9, verses 7-10: “Whatever is in your power to do, do with all your might.” They are also present in the Freudian perception that the human task is “Lieben und arbeiten,” to love and to work.

Over the many centuries of our Jewish history, and unmistakably in the modern world, there have been major Jewish religious leaders advocating and supporting one or another of these responses as being ultimately true and meaningful.

Thus far, we have surveyed intrapsychic responses to the (intrapsychic) triangular conflict of finitude: the first two responses treat our human finity as either illusory or irrelevant, hence eliminating the conflict. In sharp contrast, this finite (third) kind of response treats our unbounded human desires as illusory or irrelevant and so similarly eliminates the conflict. It should not surprise us that historically communities that emphasized either of the first two religious responses have ignored or actively opposed finite responses. However, such repression or suppression is often not helpful: for, other than stigmatizing those who disagree, such negative actions only heighten the individual's existential conflict of finitude which remains painfully unresolved.

4. Discognitive responses: For those who have been taught to deny personal finity but who simultaneously find the infinite responses to be unbelievable and unrealistic, there remains only the path summarized as "where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise" (Thomas Gray, 1742). Alvin Reines calls this a discognitive response, where the conflict of finitude "is not resolved; it is concealed" (*Polydoxy*, p. 58).

"The discognitive responses cannot be considered authentic responses to finitude, in that they do not resolve the conflict. Such responses only make the person unaware of the conflict: drugs and alcohol numb and fog the mind; suicide kills it. Moreover, except in the case of suicide, the person remains subconsciously or unconsciously aware of the conflict, and great suffering takes place even though diffused or disguised by the illness or chemical employed. The conflict of finitude, until it is properly resolved, is an essential and fundamental part of the human person, so that it is not possible to destroy awareness of the conflict and its pain without destroying the person as well" (pp. 69-70).

If one accepts a definition of religion that includes discognitive responses, then we all need to become less judgmental and more understanding. Karl Marx famously referred to religion as "the opiate of the masses." By this he clearly meant to slight traditional religion. However, the implied corollary is that, for some, opium is their religion. Certainly it is true that addictions (to heroin, alcohol, etc.) and generally addictive behavior is a response to finitude. Such may not be ideal responses, but for some individuals it is their only way to proceed through life. Organizations with an agenda like 12-step programs indicate a growing awareness of the religious nature of

discognitive responses, combined with an understanding that the other responses are both more helpful and more durable.

Whatever its official religious designation—Reform, Liberal, Progressive, Reconstructionist, Conservative, Humanistic or whatever—a polydox community is a shared voluntary association that supports individuals and families and helps them towards a meaningful and constructive response to finitude. In full awareness that every person's mind is unique and that no single response will fit every person's time and place life-situation and perspective, such a religious community seriously explores both the inherent triangular conflict and the various available responses while affirming the individual in his or her response. Given that polydoxy assumes limited human knowledge, such a Jewish religious fellowship is well suited to institutionalize and affirm finite responses as authentically Jewish and helpful to many. But the other responses to finitude are also religiously valid, worthy of serious consideration and of profound meaning for some.

Here we arrive at an essential difference between democracy and polydoxy. While both reject authoritarian rule, democracy (while welcoming much diversity) assumes that over time the will of the majority will prevail, and rightfully so. But in polydoxy, there is no authority above the perceptions and beliefs of the individual: There always are only our human attempts to understand and respond to life's difficulties and perplexities, the ongoing task and province of religion.

If we note how each individual undergoes a personal evolution—from a possibly pre-natal sensation of being within all that there is, to a mainly helpless small-child experience dependent on the good will of parental figures, to the extreme oscillations of adolescence, to the joys and responsibilities of maturity—diverse selves, diverse perspectives are unavoidable in everyone's life. How much more is diversity present in any group of individuals and families—such as a congregation. What a polydox group does is to acknowledge and support this diversity as a fundamental truth and the central core of any fallible religious community. Group action may on occasion require the majority rule of a democracy. Individual authenticity requires a group that educates without indoctrinating, accepts without judging, understands without necessarily agreeing.

While majority rule is clearly an advance beyond authoritarian governance, like all human institutions it remains fallible. While establishing legal or normative rules, every democratic organization may sometimes unavoidably trample on the individual rights of some. Majority opinions and decisions can easily slip into bullying. Known examples include discrimination

against women and others considered “deviant.” While the novel forms of religion that Professor Reines saw evolving are largely dependent on the commitment to individual rights of a democratic society, groups that enshrine these rights—polydox communities—have a vital role in modifying or correcting the flaws of majority control. The basis on which 21st-century Jews urgently seek full gender equality and the defense of LGBT rights is principled and profoundly religious. Individuals matter.

The boundaries within which a polydox community operates are defined by recognizing the equal self-authority of each individual: “my” religious freedom to act ends where “your” religious freedom begins, and vice versa. This is a prescription for religious health, not passivity. So, whatever the personal positions arrived at, it is particularly constructive to openly examine and discuss shared issues and concerns. Sharing available knowledge strengthens such a community. As public ignorance and censorship tend to weaken democracies, while fuller disclosure and debate strengthen them—so too, in an open society, teaching all known options and discussing them frankly can only strengthen religious communities that affirm their individual members.

Thus, Alvin Reines energetically proposed that, in a community open to diversity of beliefs, values and actions, religious leaders and religious institutions have an essential responsibility to help members of the community deal with the human condition of finitude—in ways that are constructive both for the individual and the larger community. In affluent, democratic societies, religious organizations (including synagogues and seminaries) that help their participants live more meaningful lives will have ongoing relevance and will also infuse ancient traditions with fresh content. Agreeing with the Jewish Reconstructionist viewpoint clearly expressed by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, we might say that ripe old vessels may sometimes become filled with sparkling, fresh spirits. However, Rabbi Alvin Reines would insist that each person’s most basic task is not loyalty to old ways but personal authenticity, the kind of religious response that enables each person to live with integrity. If this accords with traditional ways, well and good. But one size or pattern will never fit every person, circumstance or need. In the shifting kaleidoscope of our 21st-century world, innovation and experimentation may frequently be both justified and vitally necessary.

Although our contemporary experience is ever more different from the way things once were, our human nature with its inherent conflict remains essentially the same. This contradiction defines the equal possibilities of religious decline or religious growth. Proverbs 29:18 asserts both “Where there is no vision [Chazon] the people perish,” and also “Happy is one who heeds

instruction [Torah].” It is surely clear that the future of Jewish communities (and religious communities in general) depends on the clearly articulated vision and instruction provided by religious leaders.

I think that an open-ended Reform Judaism offers individuals and families much good. We now know enough to understand how little we know, and how diversity of beliefs, values and actions is both inevitable and healthy. Torah need not be viewed as rigid or dogmatic; we still are able to “see and welcome all truth,” whatever its source. For me, being a Reform rabbi has been a unique privilege and (I believe) helpful to many. I have repeatedly found that a polydox perspective is in tune with emerging reality. As an individual I have arrived at beliefs that I find to be true, and values that guide my everyday actions; as a religious leader I am comfortable with the fact that esteemed colleagues and beloved family members may disagree with my beliefs and ethical values. So be it. It is enough for me as a Reform rabbi to be an actively concerned friend and teacher of religious possibilities. My wish for Jewish and other religious communities is that they remain relevant by ensuring that, in symbolism and in overt deeds, all community members are carefully and deliberately included and not “left out in the cold.” Rather than insist that individuals change, religious communities have to reach out and meet people where they are and as they are.

One further word: As a small boy I received Torah in a ceremony sometimes called “the Chain of Jewish Tradition.” But I think Alvin J. Reines was right in pointing out that our Jewish tradition is not a ponderous, burdensome chain. Rather it is more like a rope that has many strands. At every point some strands are ending, while new strands enter and become an integral part of the whole. It is the new strands that enable this ongoing and helpful linkage from the distant past to an ever more hopeful future.

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