

The Term Polydoxy

The term "polydoxy," refers to a concept of religion and religious community. The most instructive way to introduce polydoxy, or polydox religion, is to begin with its familiar opposite, orthodox religion. In the orthodox religion, a closed set of beliefs and practices is established as true and valid by the religion's hierarchy or leaders. These beliefs and practices are obligatory upon the members of the orthodox community, and control their fundamental views and attitudes regarding personal existence and reality. Beliefs that are obligatory in an orthodoxy determine the meaning of the term "god"; the truth of the Bible (revelation); the nature of good and bad; guilt and atonement; the afterlife; and salvation (meaningful existence). Compulsory practices include services and rituals that prescribe the meaning and celebration of life-history events from birth to death; regulate such personal and public actions as conversation, marriage, and divorce; and govern generally all private, internal religious experience. Obedience is fundamental to the character of the orthodox religion; its members must follow all beliefs and practices it prescribes under pain of penalty. Freedom to choose among significant options of belief and practice is forbidden.

In the polydox religion, freedom of the individual religionist is ultimate. It is the freedom of the individual to choose among beliefs and practices that is established by the polydox community, not, as in orthodoxy, the beliefs and practices that the individual is compelled to choose. Polydox religionists have the right granted them by their community to accept belief only if it accords with their views of reality; to practice morality according to their individual consciences; and to follow only such ritual as is found meaningful. The rights and limits of the religionist's freedom in the polydox community can be epitomized in terms of a covenant, a freedom covenant. Every member of the polydox community pledges to affirm the religious freedom of all other members in return for their pledges to affirm his own. Each person's freedom, consequently, ends where the other person's freedom begins.

Orthodox and polydox religions, differing in their views regarding the individual's right to freedom within his own religious community, differ in other ways as well. One of the most important of these is the potential for change. Baldly stated, the orthodox religion has no potential for significant change. By the very nature of orthodoxy, the beliefs and rituals it

prescribes (generally attributed to the deity) are absolutes, true and valid forever.

Orthodoxy, as the meaning of the name states, is "true opinion"; true today, true yesterday and true tomorrow. If someone within an orthodoxy should change a belief or ritual, there is only one path open to the orthodox community, to brand the innovator a heretic, and impose whatever penalty is prescribed for the heresy committed. To the polydox community, change presents no threat, only challenge. Polydox religionists, affirmed in their freedom, have the right to seek truth and meaning equally in the creations of the present as they do in the traditions of the past.

The question whether a Judaism is orthodox or polydox, closed and unchanging or open and dynamic, is of critical importance to the Jew in the contemporary world. To the objective observer, there can be little question that the traditional beliefs and rituals of the prevailing Jewish religious institutions are regarded by the majority of modern Jews as untrue or irrelevant. Increasing numbers of religiously unaffiliated Jews, temples and synagogues deserted as they go about routine ceremonial functions, all testify to this fact. Despite institutional propaganda to the contrary, there is little reason to think that the numbers of disaffected Jews will lessen, indeed, all signs indicate they will increase. The rejection of traditional beliefs and rituals does not result from a temporary state of mind, but is deeply rooted in the consciousness of the majority of modern Jews living in an era of political freedom and scientific advance. If a Jewish religious community and its institutions are to survive, it is not the modern Jewish consciousness that will change, but the beliefs and rituals of the community and the practices of its institutions. Yet the changes necessary for the survival of a religious Jewishness cannot take place in orthodox communities. Significant and serious religious change is a function of freedom, and only in the polydox religious community does the freedom necessary for change exist.

What is the present status of polydoxy among the Jews? Unfortunately, none of the four generally recognized Jewish religious communities is polydox. It is evident that a religion does not require the name "Orthodox" to be orthodox. So far as their formal, national, institutional structures are concerned, Orthodox Judaism, Conservative Judaism, Reform Judaism, and Reconstructionism are for all practical purposes, in their own beliefs and practices, orthodox. It is true that in the early days of classical Reform, when important theological and liturgical changes were made, the theoretical potential for freedom inherent

and morally necessary in Reform came close to actualization. Sad to relate, this freedom did not come to consciousness, and the new beliefs and rituals themselves soon petrified in most congregations into a Reform orthodoxy. The term "god" has taken on a dogmatic, quasi-official meaning, and a traditionoid theology dominates services, ritual, and religious education. Adults and children alike are indoctrinated with "true" Reform Jewish belief and practice, rather than educated in freedom. The failure of Reform to arrive at a conscious awareness and open avowal of freedom has most recently led to ominous consequences. There has been a serious increase in pressure among the institutional Reform leadership to do away with the last vestiges of progress made in the classical period of Reform and to return to an antiquarian dogmatism that will rigidly control the religious life of the Reform Jew.

Despite the orthodox nature of the formal Jewish religious communities, polydox Judaism (particularly in isolated Reform congregations) and polydox Jews do exist. Yet polydox Jews, particularly among the youth, are confronted with special problems. They are alienated by the orthodoxy of institutional Jewish life, an orthodoxy that is maintained in large measure by the unavailability of liturgical, ritual and educational materials suitable for free religious use. To combat this alienation, ICJ is committed in its research programs to develop materials of freedom suitable for polydox religious experience and education. In addition, ICJ offers those who are isolated in their quest for a creative Jewishness a sense of community, the Polydox Jewish Community. There is much for the Polydox Jewish Community to do. In a world emerging into freedom from unjustifiable restrictions on personal existence, the polydox principle has universalistic relevance. By creating and succeeding in its own existence, the free Jewish religious community teaches and supports the principle of polydoxy everywhere.

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*Note: ICJ refers to the Institution of Creative Judaism. The Institute of Creative Judaism is now the Polydox Institute.