

The belief a person holds with respect to the question of afterexistence—that is, whether there is human existence after death and the form it takes—is intrinsically related to the particular religion to which one adheres. Hence it is necessary to preface this presentation of my view respecting afterexistence with a brief description of my interpretation of Reform Judaism, the religion of which I am an adherent. The reader will notice that I state “my interpretation of Reform Judaism.” This phrase is significant. The reason is that no single or formal definition of Reform exists on which all members of the Reform community agree. There are, accordingly, different definitions or interpretations of Reform Judaism. This being the case, individual Reform Jews’ views on afterexistence can, and often do, disagree as well.

Reform Judaism, as I define it, is a polydoxy.¹ Essentially this means Reform Judaism is a religion affirming the principle that each of its adherents possesses an ultimate right to religious autonomy or self-authority. Thus Reform Judaism affirms the right of all Reform Jews to act as their own ultimate authorities in determining their religious beliefs, and this entails the fundamental right to determine their own beliefs with respect to the question whether there is an afterexistence, and if there is an afterexistence, the form it takes.

Thus there are significant substantive and procedural consequences for Reform Jews regarding belief concerning an afterexistence when Reform is defined as a polydoxy.

1. There is no particular belief or dogma in Reform with respect to the subject of afterexistence that is incumbent upon Reform Jews to accept.
2. So far as Reform is concerned, no individual Reform Jew’s view regarding afterexistence is more valid than any other’s.
3. No reason exists for individual Reform Jews to enter into controversy with one another over whose belief is the correct one or the “true Reform” belief. Every Reform Jew has a right to her or his belief; no one’s belief is “more” Reform Jewish than is another’s; and no Reform Jew has a right to impose her or his belief on others.

4. The only reason for Reform Jews to hold a belief regarding afterexistence is that they wish to do so. Reform does not require its adherents to have any belief concerning afterexistence or even to think about the subject at all.

The nature and significance of the Reform Jewish position on afterexistence is thrown into bold relief when contrasted with that of Orthodox Judaism. In Orthodox Judaism there is a particular belief (dogma) regarding afterexistence that every Orthodox Jew must accept as true. This dogma is resurrection,² the coming to life of persons after death as they existed before death—namely, with the same minds and bodies. Along with the dogma of resurrection are included beliefs in a theistic God's judgment of the persons resurrected (dispensation of reward and punishment for the deeds performed by the person before death); sublimation to heaven (*olam haba*);³ and hell. The Orthodox Jew who denies this eschatology is guilty of heresy and condemned for this sin to the punishment of eternal annihilation. In Reform, on the other hand, there is complete freedom to respond to the question of afterexistence as one chooses. There is no heresy or sin regardless of the decision that is made.

The Jewish Treasury of Afterexistence Concepts

It is all very well to say that individual Reform Jews possess the ultimate moral right to believe whichever concept regarding afterexistence they personally find convincing. It is, however, a daunting task for individuals to create de novo the many possible afterexistence concepts to consider before making a choice. This is the reason study of the Jewish religious past is of such great value to the Reform Jew. It is no overstatement to say that each of the major concepts regarding afterexistence has at one time or another been explored and believed in by some Jewish religious community or individual thinker. The past is a storehouse of Reform Jewish options regarding afterexistence belief. Before stating my own view, the following brief summary of the afterexistence concepts proposed by other Jews will show the reader the rich variety of choices

open to Reform Jews. At the same time, this summary catalogs the views, which, except for one, I have considered and rejected.⁴ Even though rejected, profound religious concepts that have been examined and evaluated in depth enrich the psyche.

There are no agreed-upon terms among philosophers and theologians to refer to the positions enumerated below, but in this presentation a term once defined will be employed consistently in the sense given. One preliminary point remains to be made. The concepts regarding afterexistence enumerated, excepting finitism, all refer to existence after death that is personal—namely, what exists after the death of a person is an entity consciously aware it has the identity and continues the individual existence of the person it was in its earthly life before death. Thus personal afterexistence excludes such notions of afterexistence as: “living on after death in the memory of others”; “living on after death in the accomplishments that survive one’s death”; “living on after death through one’s descendants”; and similar views.

1. *Immortality*: a concept of personal afterexistence in which the soul or mind survives the death of a person’s body.
2. *Resurrection*: a concept of personal afterexistence in which the identical mind and body of the person who has died, as originally joined, come to life again some time after the person has died.
3. *Sublimation*: a concept of personal afterexistence in which a person’s mind and body jointly survive death in a transfigured, nobler, more spiritual form. Sublimation can take place after resurrection. After resurrection the persons die again and experience sublimation. Resurrection and subsequent sublimation are basic beliefs of Pharisaic (Orthodox) Judaism. (Many persons believe that resurrection and sublimation are the original Jewish concepts regarding afterexistence. This is incorrect. The afterexistence belief of the Pentateuch [Torah] and Sadduceism, both of which antedate Pharisaism, is finitism, which is discussed below.)
4. *Sheolism*: the concept of personal afterexistence that persons

after death continue to exist in Sheol, which, in the Bible, is taken to be the abode of those who have died.

5. *Transmigration*: a concept of personal afterexistence in which the soul passes at death from the body that has perished to another body.
6. *Afterexistence agnosticism*: the view that belief about a personal afterexistence is to be withheld on the basis that there does not exist competent evidence upon which to make a judgment.
7. *Finitism*: the concept that neither the mind nor the body of the human person survives death. Death is the end of individual personal existence. Finitism differs from afterexistence agnosticism in that the former makes a definite judgment that there is no survival of personal individuality after death, whereas the latter states there is no knowledge regarding personal afterexistence enabling a decision one way or the other. Finitism can include such sentiments as “living on after one’s death through one’s children or through good deeds,” inasmuch as such sentiments do not signify belief in a personal afterexistence.

Religion and Afterexistence

As has been stated, there is no obligation in Reform requiring a Reform Jew to deal with the question of what happens after death. A Reform Jew can choose any of the alternative views on personal afterexistence enumerated above, but the choice exists not to think about the subject at all. Should a Reform Jew then confront the difficult subjects of one’s own death and afterexistence? My personal conviction is that one should, and the reason is based upon the fundamental concerns of the human person and the nature of religion as I understand them to be.

Religion, in my view, is defined as: “the human person’s response to the conflict of finitude.”⁵ This definition is based upon a concept of the human person as possessing two constituent fundamental elements in conflict with each other. One of these is awareness of oneself as pervasively finite; the other is a passionately intense desire

to be infinite. Although I believe these two existential elements are present in the human person from the earliest stages, the age at which they attain a significant place in consciousness varies with the individual. By the human person being “pervasively finite” I mean the powers of humans are limited to the point where they fall short of every conceivable or imaginable standard of perfection. To illustrate this point: the human intellect cannot attain complete understanding of the universe; a perfect intellect would. The human mind and body are subject to disease and aging; a perfect mind and body would not be. Probably the most striking instance of human finity is the fact of death, the person’s limited power to exist. Although finite, the human person, consciously or unconsciously, possesses a profound desire to be infinite—namely, to know all there is to know; to be mentally and physically invulnerable; and never to die.⁶ The human conflict between awareness of one’s finity and the longing to be infinite is referred to as “the conflict of finitude.” The conflict of finitude left unresolved produces within the person feelings of angst and melancholy that drain human existence of meaning. This state of meaningless existence is termed “asoteria.”

The deeply painful state of asoteria produced by the conflict of finitude gives rise to an urgent demand within the person to respond to the conflict and thereby resolve it. Successful resolution of the conflict of finitude brings the person to a state of ultimate meaningful existence, termed “soteria.” The human response to the conflict of finitude is what I define as religion.

There are, I believe, fundamentally two valid responses to the conflict of finitude: the infinite response and the finite response. Although there are different kinds of infinite responses, all share the fundamental and essential characteristic of denying that death is the end of human existence, and all affirm belief in some form of personal afterexistence.⁷ By believing in a personal afterexistence, a person resolves the conflict of finitude. The conflict of finitude, as stated above, is produced by the anguished clash between people’s awareness of their finity and their yearning to be infinite. Accordingly,

by believing in a personal afterexistence, people reject the awareness that they are finite and affirm that, on the contrary, they are infinite. There is then no conflict between what such persons now believe themselves to be—namely, infinite—and their intense desire to be infinite. They are what they passionately long to be and thus attain soteria. It is true that not all concepts of personal afterexistence provide everything infinite desire can imaginably wish for; each concept does, however, offer what humans yearn for most: infinite personal existence, and so, soteria.

The finite response to the conflict of finitude is basically the opposite of the infinite response. In making a finite response to the conflict, persons affirm as true their awareness of themselves as finite. This then clashes with the infinite desire within them. Thus, to resolve the conflict these persons must renounce infinite desire. Renunciation means acceptance of the limits bounding human existence, the reshaping of infinite desire into finite desire, and, in particular, reconciliation to one's death. By renouncing infinite desire, the will of these people to live is now a wish for finite existence, the existence they affirm they possess. Such people are now what they wish to be, the conflict of finitude is resolved, and with the resolution of the conflict soteria is attained.

The fundamental conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing discussion of the nature of religion is that whichever belief regarding afterexistence a person adheres to, the person can attain soteria. Whether one believes in eternal personal afterexistence or that personal existence terminates at death, one can achieve ultimate meaningful existence. It is, however, also clear from this definition of religion that failure to deal with one's finity—in particular, one's own death—leaves unresolved a human's fundamental existential problem, the conflict of finitude, and invites the continuing haunting presence of asoteria.

The point has been emphasized that in Reform Judaism all beliefs regarding afterexistence are valid, which is not the case in authoritarian orthodox religions. In such religions as Orthodox Judaism, Roman Catholicism, and Sunni Islam, not only is belief in a personal

afterexistence obligatory but belief in a particular kind of personal afterexistence. Hence adherents of Reform Judaism do not have the problem that can confront orthodox religionists—namely, that of being unable to accept as true their religion's obligatory beliefs respecting afterexistence, which constitutes sin, and thereby induces guilt. For Reform Jews have the moral right to determine for themselves what their beliefs shall be regarding afterexistence. Yet Reform Jews can experience a problem with regard to belief in afterexistence: this is not conflict with their religion but internal conflict, one they engage in within themselves. Perhaps the form such conflict takes most frequently is this: Reform Jewish adherents come to the conclusion intellectually that they are in fact finite, and death consequently means the end of personal existence, but nevertheless are unable to give up infinite desire for eternal personal afterexistence. Such people are not at war with their religion, Reform Judaism, but with themselves. Internal strife of this nature obstructs resolution of the conflict of finitude and, to be dealt with productively, requires disciplined introspective and volitional effort.

Reasons for Believing in Personal Afterexistence

We arrive then at reasons why Reform Jews might believe in the survival of personal existence after death. These reasons are, of course, not necessarily exclusive to Reform Jews. There are only a limited number of reasons for belief in personal afterexistence, and historically these have often been shared by a number of different religious communities. Not all possible reasons for personal afterexistence will here be presented, only those that appear relevant to the present-day Reform community. Since Reform Jews enjoy autonomy with respect to beliefs relating to afterexistence, they have a right to choose whatever reasons they find convincing to support their beliefs. Consequently, I am presenting these reasons for the purpose of discussion, although my view is that they are either philosophically, psychologically, or scientifically unsound. Yet it does not matter if Reform Jews find one another's reasons unconvincing inasmuch as they have no right to impose their reasons

for belief or disbelief on others who can simply reject them as unsatisfactory.

The reasons enumerated below stand alone, but some believers in personal afterexistence employ more than one.

1. Acceptance of hearsay evidence in which one person is told by another that the latter has firsthand experience or convincing evidence of some other kind proving there is personal existence after death. People who base their belief on hearsay evidence have no evidence for the belief other than someone else's unsupported word.
2. Acceptance of some document (such as the Bible) as infallibly true in which it is stated there is a personal afterexistence.⁸
3. Belief in a theistic God who exercises a just providence over humankind and therefore sees to it that every person is rewarded for good deeds and punished for evil ones. Inasmuch as it is evident that many good persons in this earthly life suffer undeserved misfortune and many evildoers enjoy undeserved prosperity, it is evident that many persons die without receiving their merited rewards and punishments. Consequently, since the theistic God is just, there must be a personal afterexistence in which all receive their proper rewards or punishments.⁹
4. Belief in a theistic God who is infinitely good and merciful and thus grants all humans a meaningful personal afterexistence.
5. Experiencing one's soul or self as having lived before in a different body or bodies at a different time or times; and concluding from this that one will again live in another body after the present body one occupies perishes.
6. Having an experience in which one has communicated with a person who has died. This experience may have come about directly or through a medium.¹⁰
7. The belief that the individual human intellect could not learn all the thought it creates or comes to know in a single lifetime, and therefore concluding that the intellect must have existed

prior to the body as a disembodied soul in a spiritual realm where it acquired the knowledge it displays during its earthly life.¹¹

8. Belief without any evidence in a personal afterexistence simply because one wishes to or because it makes life more meaningful. The notion is sometimes added that a person may as well believe in a personal afterexistence, for if the belief turns out to be wrong, nothing is lost, and meanwhile one has been made happy in this life by the thought.

Finitism

My position is finitism; I do not believe there is a personal afterexistence. When I die, my individual identity will be annihilated, and both my psyche and body will perish. I would like to expand on my belief in finitism with respect to two points: why I believe finitism is true; and the implications of finitism for a view of deity.

With respect to the truth of finitism, as with any belief, the first decision to be made is whether to require evidence in order to accept the belief as true. Then, should evidence be required, what kind of evidence must it be? For myself, my decision is that I only accept as true a belief that is supported by evidence; and the evidence I require consists of either a *sensum* (plural: *sensa*) or *selfum* (plural: *selfa*). A *sensum* is a perception experienced through one of the five senses; a *selfum* is an apprehension experienced through introspection. Broadly stated, *sensa* provide information concerning the external world, or not-self, and *selfa* provide information concerning the internal world, or self. Bear in mind that decisions regarding what constitutes evidence are based on arbitrary individual choices, and people will differ in their choices. Thus, for example, I accept *sensa* alone as providing information about what exists in the external world. Others, however, contend they receive information about realities in the external world through means other than the five senses. (Examples of this: some people claim they apprehend the “presence” of a deity through means other than the five senses; others claim they experience extra-

sensory perception.) Disagreement among members of a polydox community over the evidence each requires for belief about afterexistence and the different resulting beliefs presents no difficulty since each individual possesses an ultimate right to religious autonomy.

Having said this, I will examine briefly the reasons for belief in a personal afterexistence enumerated above, and indicate why none meets the standard of evidence for belief that I require.

1. Since I require the personal experience of apprehending a *sensum* or *selfum* as the only competent evidence for accepting a belief as true, I reject hearsay evidence as incompetent. I accept no religious belief on the basis of evidence someone else has experienced and I have not. (It is overwhelming to contemplate the myriad of individual religious experiences—often contradicting one another—one would have to believe by affirming the validity of hearsay evidence.)
2. Historically, the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Pentateuch (Torah), has been the primary document for which the status of infallible revelation has been claimed. Upon critical examination of the Bible, however, I find (as does critical scholarship universally) this claim cannot be supported. My conclusion, therefore, is that the Bible is the product of human minds and, therefore, fallible, for human minds are inherently limited and subject to error. Consequently the Bible cannot provide infallible evidence for any belief. Furthermore, even if the Bible were taken as infallible, nowhere is the concept of a personal afterexistence presented as a dogma of any form of biblical religion.
3. The view that there is a theistic God who exercises a just providence over humankind, which is the basis of the third reason given for belief in a personal afterexistence, must itself first be shown to be true before it can be employed as evidence to prove there is a personal afterexistence. My own examination of the facts of existence leads me to conclude theism is untrue.¹² Consequently, since the notion of a just providence requires the premise of a theistic God, I do not accept the

argument that there is a just providence requiring a personal afterexistence.

4. Just as my theological examination of the facts of existence leads me to the conclusion that there is no theistic deity who exercises a just providence, so do I also conclude from these facts that there is no theistic God out of whose perfect goodness personal afterexistence is bestowed upon humankind.
5. Upon thorough introspective examination I find no evidence that I possess a soul that previously occupied another body. Since I do not accept hearsay evidence, I give no credence to those who claim to have such a soul. Hence I reject the notion of transmigration and find it, therefore, no justification for belief in personal afterexistence.
6. I have had no experience of communication with those who have died. The reports of others who claim to have done so I reject as hearsay evidence.
7. The explanation for the remarkable accomplishments of the human intellect that it preexisted the body as a disembodied soul in a spiritual realm requires the existence of both disembodied souls and a spiritual realm. Since I have evidence of neither, I must reject this explanation of intellectual activity. (Please note that such an explanation raises more questions than it answers. We begin with the problem of explaining human knowledge and find ourselves with two far more abstruse problems: explaining the existence of disembodied souls and of a spiritual realm.)

Why Death?

The reasons I accept finitism and reject belief in a personal afterexistence are now clear. The only position for which I have credible evidence is that death brings to an end the psychic and physical existence of a human being.¹³ I am not unmindful that the idea of personal afterexistence is a more pleasant fate to contemplate than is the personal annihilation of finitism. Authentic religious belief, however, does not consist of what one wishes were true of

reality but of what credible evidence establishes as true of reality. Yet belief in finitism does not mean the end of thought about death. Profound metaphysical and theological questions arise from the fact of human death. In my view, the most fundamental of these is: Why death? Why does earthly human existence come to an end?

The classic theological explanation of the reason for human death appears in Genesis.¹⁴ It states there that the god Yahveh completed creation of the universe by bringing forth Adam and Eve, the first humans. Yahveh then placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, where he provided for all their needs. He made all kinds of beautiful trees grow in Eden whose fruits were good to eat. A restriction, however, was placed upon the fruits that Adam and Eve were permitted to eat. Yahveh commanded them:

From every tree in the garden you
are free to eat;
but from the tree of knowledge of
good and evil you must not eat.¹⁵

Adam and Eve, however, disobeyed Yahveh's command not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and bad. For their disobedience Yahveh imposed a number of punishments on them. Moreover, these punishments were not limited to Adam and Eve but were extended to all their descendants. Among these punishments was that Adam and Eve and all their descendants must undergo death:

By the sweat of your brow shall you earn your living until
you return to the ground, since it was from it that you were
taken. For dust you are and to dust you must return.¹⁶

The theological justification expressed in Genesis for the origin of human death may be phrased this way. There exists a creator God of the universe, Yahveh, who has the power to grant to humans eternal life without death. For the sin of Adam and Eve, however, Yahveh imposed upon all humans the punishment that they must undergo death. What this Yahvistic view comes to, therefore, is

that there is a theistic deity who can bestow upon humans eternal life without death but who has chosen not to as a continuing punishment for the sins of Adam and Eve.¹⁷ In sum, the creator God has the power to grant to human beings a richly meaningful eternal life without the plethora of evils that beset them but by divine choice refuses to do so.

My notion of God, generally stated, belongs to what are characterized as “finite God” concepts. Very different views of the nature of God are included under the rubric of “finite God” concepts. What they all have in common is the belief that whatever deity may be, deity is not omnipotent. In my view of the finity of God, divine power is limited to the point where God is incapable of being the ground (cause) of any kind of existence other than finite beings. It is not, therefore, humans alone who are finite, but everything that exists is necessarily finite, from subatomic particles to galaxies and the universe itself.¹⁸ Accordingly, human death is not the result of divine punishment but the result of divine finity. There exists no deity who can bestow upon humankind eternal blissful life without death but who withholds this paradisiacal life out of divine displeasure with the first humans. Rather there is a finite deity without the power to give humans more than the limited existence they have. Finitism, understood in the light of a finite God, is not then the forced acceptance of the vengeful decree of a wrathful God, but the shaping of one’s will to the reality of a finite deity who has no more power than to be the ground of beings subject to death.

NOTES

1. Alvin J. Reines, *Polydoxy: Explorations in a Philosophy of Liberal Religion* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1987), pp. 24ff.
2. See “Resurrection,” pp. 21–34 in this volume.
3. *Ibid.*
4. The concepts enumerated are discussed in some detail in other sections of this volume.
5. Reines, *Polydoxy*, pp. 63ff.

6. The particular infinite desires referred to here are, of course, not the only ways in which infinite desire can be experienced. Other particular infinite desires can express the basic general infinite desire.
7. As enumerated previously, pp. 130ff.
8. This is the primary reason for belief in a personal afterexistence in such religions as Orthodox Judaism, Roman Catholicism, and Sunni Islam.
9. This reasoning is somewhat similar to an argument formulated by Kant.
10. A medium is also referred to as a "channel."
11. This reasoning reflects a Platonic position.
12. Reines, *Polydaxy*, pp. 168ff.
13. I reject the view of afterexistence agnosticism that there is insufficient evidence upon which to make a decision regarding afterexistence; all credible evidence supports finitism.
14. Gen. 2:7–3:24.
15. Gen. 2:16ff.
16. Gen. 3:19.
17. Even those who believe in a personal afterexistence agree that a person must first undergo death.
18. See Reines, *Polydaxy*, pp. 176ff.