

GOD AND JEWISH THEOLOGY

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I

A mode of consciousness has become widespread that rejects the concept of deity which for centuries has been identified by the popular mind with Judaism and even with religion itself. I say that this identification has been made by the "popular mind" because those who engage in the scientific study of Judaism have long been aware that this concept is not the original concept of deity among the Jews, and it is certainly not the only one that has been subscribed to in the Jewish continuum. This concept, which is commonly called theistic absolutism, is the notion that God is a transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent person who is directly concerned with the individual and collective welfare of man. This concern of God's is supposedly expressed by a providence which guides and controls the affairs of man both through ordinary (natural) and extraordinary (miraculous) causation.

The rejection of theistic absolutism is prevalent among clergy

and laity alike. In the case of the former, it is made expressly and self-consciously, and has become increasingly explicit of late. The rejection by the laity is subtler but even more significant. It is the rejection, as it were, of silence, the ordering of one's life and the resolution of its difficulties without recourse—other than nominal—to the God of this concept.

The problems raised for institutional Judaism by the rejection of theistic absolutism seem to many, both within the institution and without, to be insuperable. However, I believe that the critical nature of these problems is more apparent than real and rests upon the acceptance of certain dogmatic and a priori beliefs which are, in fact, fallacious. These beliefs may be formulated as follows: (a) the word "God" properly refers only to a being defined by one concept, theistic absolutism, so that if this concept is rejected it follows that there is no God, or, as some have put it, "God is dead"; (b) religion is to be understood only as *belief in theistic absolutism*, so that if theistic absolutism is false it follows that all religion is false; and (c) every Jewish religious system is intrinsically committed to belief in theistic absolutism, so that if theistic absolutism is refuted or rejected it follows that every form of Judaism is refuted or rejected.

In the course of the following discussion, I shall attempt to show that these beliefs are fallacies. Not that I think that the rejection of theistic absolutism is a trifling matter in the history of religion, or that all religious systems are consistent with the mode of consciousness that rejects it. On the contrary, it is fairly clear that neither Orthodox Judaism, Roman Catholicism, nor normative Protestant Christianity is consistent with such thinking. But there is, in my opinion, a system of Judaism—namely, Reform Judaism—which can be shown to be fully consistent with the mode of consciousness that rejects theistic absolutism, and which is also coherent with the nontheistic theologies proposed by many contemporary religious thinkers. I propose to develop this thesis by an analysis of the three terms basic to any Jewish theology—"theology," "Jewish," and "God."

The most prominent feature of the terms "theology," "Jewish," and "God" is that none of them enjoys an absolute meaning. Thus these terms, when employed without extensive qualification, can neither communicate knowledge nor provide understanding. The most obvious of the several reasons for this situation is that the

use of these terms is not, for the most part, indigenous to the religious experience of the Jews. The very word "Jew," *Yehudi*, whose adjective "Jewish" is taken generally to describe the totality of this experience, refers in part to people and events of a time long preceding the post-biblical period in which the word is first found. Moreover, until recent times, Hebrew was almost the sole language of Jewish religious expression, and it is a very problematic enterprise to attempt to discover the Hebrew concepts and expressions that the term "God," derived from the Gothic *guth*, and the term "theology," taken from Greek philosophy, may be held to connote or translate. As for the use of "theology" by Jews in whose native languages the term appears, this has occurred only in the most recent period, and then in a bewildering variety of senses.

Hence the subject may be pursued from the point of view of history, in which the many usages of the past, which in no way lays down authoritative or univocal meanings, are defined and catalogued. However, my concern is not with instances of past usage, but with advancing selected and even new meanings of these terms for present acceptance. In short, I shall offer a theory of God and Jewish theology that is appropriate to the philosophy of Reform Judaism.

The phrase "appropriate to a philosophy of Reform Judaism" requires clarification. As employed here, the word "philosophy" is understood as "the science or study of the principles, pervasive characteristics, or essence of a subject." The subject is Reform Judaism, and the philosophy of Reform Judaism is the science which precedes the study of any part or element of Reform Judaism. Concepts of God and Jewish theology constitute such elements, and no definition of these terms relevant to Reform Judaism can be given until the nature of Reform Judaism is itself first determined. The philosophy of Reform Judaism provides knowledge of this nature. By abstracting the general and pervasive characteristics of Reform Judaism the philosophy of Reform reveals to us its essence, which, in determining the nature of Reform Judaism as a whole, determines the nature of its parts as well. The many meanings which the terms "God" and "Jewish theology" admit prohibit their use in significant discourse without clear and univocal definition. In proceeding to such definition, we

shall reject some meanings, select others, and create new ones. The principle of selectivity and creativity is in all cases "appropriateness to the philosophy of Reform Judaism," which limits our freedom in two ways. One directly, in that no definition of "God," "Jewish," or "theology" relevant to Reform Judaism can be given which is inconsistent with the essence of Reform Judaism; and the other indirectly, in that, of two or more definitions of these terms all of which are consistent with the essence of Reform, the definition most coherent with its essence and spirit is to be preferred.

It is not my intention here to present a philosophy of Reform Judaism.¹ However, inasmuch as the concepts of God and Jewish theology later to be offered will presuppose certain principles of this philosophy, it is necessary to summarize these principle briefly before proceeding further.

The first principle is that the community of Reform Jews denies the existence of an authoritative body of knowledge or beliefs whose affirmation is obligatory upon the members of the community. The rationale behind this principle may be analyzed into three points. The first is the denial that Scripture in its entirety is the literal word of God. This denial must be made, otherwise some form of either Sadduceism or Pharisaism is true, and Reform Judaism clearly rejects both. Thus this denial is the proximate cause which brings Reform Judaism into existence and the ground upon which it stands. The second point is the presumption that if Scripture is not in its entirety the literal word of God, there is no authoritative way, other than through a subsequent prophecy, to establish what the actual word of God is, whether in Scripture or elsewhere. No one, to the satisfaction of the Reform Jewish community, has established that he has received such a prophecy, that is, a direct and literal communication from the divine mind. Evidence satisfactory to the Reform Jewish community would consist in such verification as Scripture and the Jewish continuum generally require for prophecy, for example, miracles and the prediction of future events whose occurrence is naturally unknowable. The third point is the presumption that knowledge or belief which is the product of finite minds is fallible and therefore not obligatory upon Reform Jews. Since the existence of prophecy has not been established to the satisfaction of

the Reform Jewish community, there is only fallible knowledge, and this may be accepted or rejected as individual preference dictates.

The second principle of Reform Judaism is that Reform is a polydoxy. A polydoxy is defined as a religion that admits as equally valid all opinions on the great themes of religion, such as the meaning of God, the nature of man, etc. The only beliefs disallowed are those inconsistent with its polydox nature, for example, belief in an authoritative revelation or an orthodox doctrine. The polydox religious institution as such is committed only to the affirmation of its members' individual freedom. The recognition of Reform Judaism as a polydoxy flows from the first principle. The only mode of religious organization coherent with the doctrine that no person possesses the right to impose his beliefs upon others is one that affirms the radical freedom of its adherents. In a polydoxy the religious institution does not prescribe the total religious life of its followers. Membership in the community, viewed from the total religious commitment possible, constitutes in itself only a state of potentiality. Through the dialogues its followers pursue with one another, the possibilities of religious choice are presented and realization through decision invited. Persuasion through suggestion, not indoctrination by promulgation and interdiction, is the form of instruction and communication proper to a polydoxy.

II

In developing a theory of God and Jewish theology appropriate to the philosophy of Reform Judaism, we must first engage in an analysis of the term "theology." This word as such possesses no significant or clear history of usage in the Jewish religious past. Perhaps this is the reason, in part, that its use among Jews today reflects such varied and even contradictory meanings. It should be noted, however, that almost from its inception in Aristotle, "theology" has been employed by religionists and philosophers to represent many meanings, so that usage today in Christianity and philosophy shows a similar variety and ambiguity. The many uses of the word theology do not concern us per se, except to note that the word is a general problem. Our interest is in arriving at a meaning suitable to Reform Judaism. We will, therefore, limit

ourselves to the following points in this order: the basic or classical definition of theology; a definition appropriate to Reform; an analysis of the major forms theology has taken; and, finally, the forms that are possible in Reform.

The classical definition of theology is "the science or study which treats of God, his nature and attributes, and his relations to man and the universe." This definition, I maintain, is not entirely suited for Reform Jewish use. Appropriateness is determined by the twofold rule laid down above: (1) no part of a religion, such as theology, can be inconsistent with its essence; and (2) where a part admits of two or more consistent definitions, the one most coherent with the essence and its spirit is to be preferred. Polydoxy has been described as an essential characteristic of Reform, which means that the members of the Reform Jewish community are affirmed in their freedom, and that all opinions of Reform Jews on such subjects as God are, therefore, equally valid so far as the institution of Reform Judaism is concerned. In the classical definition of theology as "the science or study which treats of God, his nature and attributes," the clear implication is that there is an *ens reale* of which theology is the study. However, theology in a polydoxy, particularly one respectful of scientific method, cannot proceed in this closed and uncritical manner. There are those in a polydoxy who, out of their freedom, will deny a reality reference to the term God, yet whose study in arriving at this conclusion is their investigation of God. A definition of theology appropriate to Reform should include their activity. Moreover, the term theology applied to their study is apt in that it conveys the nuance of approval for the activity it designates, and the study of God pursued by those persons has the same institutional approval in polydox Judaism as the study of those whose conclusions are ostensibly more congenial with past theologies of the Jewish continuum. Hence the definition of "theology" I would offer as coherent with the essence and spirit of Reform Judaism is the following: "the science or study which treats of the meaning of the word God."

This definition satisfies both the polydox and scientific needs of Reform: the former, in that a Reform Jew who studies the possible meanings of the word "God" engages in "theology" whatever his conclusion about this meaning may be; the latter, inasmuch as a Reform Jew who theologizes is not committed beforehand to

any conclusion and may pursue his investigation in a scientific manner without presuppositions. Furthermore, this definition requires no change in the classical meaning of theology, since it continues to include all the activity that the term has otherwise denoted. Its usage is merely extended to cover all the activity of our present age. This definition makes of theology an open enterprise, with the capacity to serve the Reform community's often expressed feeling that knowledge and religion are progressive and continually advance.

The forms of theology are those general procedures which have been followed in establishing the meaning of the word "God." We will concern ourselves only with those forms which serve to establish the meaning of "God" as reference to a real existent. These forms may be classified as follows:

1. *Theology which proceeds on the evidence of an authoritative revelation.* An authoritative revelation is one that a religious community or group of persons accepts as possessing absolute right over them. This is usually because the revelation is understood to come literally from God and therefore to be infallible. This form of theology is the primary means of establishing a reality referent for God in such religions as Pharisaic Judaism and the fundamentalist types of Christianity. Such a theology is inappropriate to Reform, since it is inconsistent with the first principle of the philosophy of Reform Judaism discussed above—that there is no authoritative body of knowledge or belief whose affirmation is obligatory on the members of the Reform Jewish community. No theology can bring as evidence for its truth that which must itself first be proved true. Therefore, a Reform theology which assumes the style of an authoritative, systematic theology may give the appearance of theology of this (first) form, but it belongs in actuality to theology of the fourth or the fifth form discussed below.
2. *Theology which proceeds on the evidence of certain and irrefragable natural knowledge.* Examples of theologies which claim to proceed in this manner are Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Spinoza's *Ethics*, and probably the system of Maimonides. If such a theology were to be demonstrated, it would, of course, compel assent and through reason be

authoritative over man. However, so far as I know, no present claim to such knowledge exists.

3. *Theology which proceeds on the combined evidence of infallible authoritative revelation and certain natural knowledge, and which seeks to reconcile whatever conflicts or contradictions appear to exist between them.* This form is often taken, erroneously, as the model and basic meaning of theology. Philo and Saadia, among the Jews, and Thomas Aquinas among the Christians, are representative exponents of this mode of theologizing, which was prevalent throughout the Middle Ages. Theology of this form is inappropriate to Reform Judaism for the reasons given in evaluating forms (1) and (2) above.
4. *Theology which proceeds on the evidence of subjective experience.* This evidence is subjective—so far as the total religious community is concerned—because the experience occurs privately to one or several persons of the community, and is not or cannot be shared or verified by the other members. Reported examples of such experience are: prophetic visions, the apprehension of a presence or power taken to be God, mystic union, the solitary witnessing of a miracle, and (more recently) the Buberian "I-Thou." This form of theology is, in principle, appropriate to Reform Judaism, for the evaluation of theological evidence as subjective has for its corollary the judgment that the theology is fallible and without authority over others. There is no sensible reason why the members of a religious community should accept the beliefs of a fellow-religionist on the latter's unverifiable assertion that there exists private evidence for those beliefs. History is replete with the tragic consequences of subjective theology. Hence such a theology is consistent with Reform Judaism only when a renunciation of authority is understood to accompany it.
5. *Theology which proceeds on the evidence of objective experience.* The basic characteristic of objective evidence is that it is apprehended publicly. Generally speaking, evidence is objective to a community of religionists if, given ordinary conditions, every member of the community can experience it. Since new members are continually entering

a community, objective experience must be repeatable at will. Experiences that are unique, for example, the reported cleavage of the Red Sea, are objective only to the persons who witness them. Since such events cannot be reproduced at will, the testimony of those who witness them, or the tradition that reports this witness, is subjective evidence to those who have not observed the event directly. Theology based upon the evidence of repeatable objective experience, like all natural knowledge critically considered, is uncertain or probable. Since this theology is open to error, it is not authoritative so far as the community as a totality is concerned. Such methods of determining truth as pragmatism, coherence, and empirical verifiability are employed in this form of theology.

In concluding this discussion of the word theology, I should like to point out a significant corollary of the foregoing analysis. This concerns the phrase "Reform Jewish theology," which is often taken to refer to some one kind of study into the meaning of God and some one conclusion resulting from such study. Added to this is the vague implication that this one theology is obligatory on all Reform Jews. The fact is that many theologies are consistent with the essence of Reform Judaism, and the phrase "Reform Jewish theology" is capriciously or erroneously used in referring to some putative "only possible" theological system in Reform Judaism. Only if Reform as we now know it undergoes essential change can such an authoritative theology be established. Either the nature of Reform as a liberal religion or polydoxy will be arbitrarily subverted, or the entire community will share in an experience which conclusively and irrefragably establishes such a theology as true. Yet the phrase "Reform Jewish theology" is not entirely without present meaning. It may refer either to the aggregate of particular Reform theologies, all consistent with the essence of Reform Judaism, or to the general discussion that lays down the conditions which a theology must meet to be appropriate to Reform Judaism and as such refers to no single method of theologizing or to any particular conception of deity.

III

The word we next turn to is "Jewish." What characteristic or quality must a theology possess so that the name Jewish is properly given to it? What, in other words, is meant in Reform Judaism by the phrase "Jewish theology"? At first it would seem that only that theology is properly called Jewish which is identical with the theology which has been called Jewish in the past. We may term this the static use of the term Jewish, and the criterion of identity with the past, *the static rule*. The simplicity of the static rule is obvious and appealing. Unfortunately, the static use of the term "Jewish" is impossible as regards Reform Jewish theology. For at least three reasons, each of which is decisive by itself, the static rule cannot be applied to give meaning to the term "Jewish" in the phrase "Reform Jewish theology." The first of these is factual, the second essential, the third practical.

First, Reform Judaism, in denying literal and infallible revelation, is the first religious system (excepting, perhaps, systems of individuals like Maimonides, which differ otherwise from Reform) of the Jewish continuum to do so. Hence if the static rule were to be followed, there would be no Reform *Judaism* and Reform *Jewish* theology at all. Thus Reform Judaism, by the very fact of its existence, repudiates the static rule.

Second, any meaning of the word "Jewish" appropriate to Reform Judaism must be appropriate to the essence of Reform. This essence implies that there are no authoritative theological beliefs or dogmas obligatory on Reform Jews and that Reform Judaism is a polydoxy affirming every Reform Jew's radical freedom. Therefore, if "Jewish" is properly applied only to a belief identical with that of the past, we have the absurd result that this word in the phrase "Reform Jewish" contradicts the whole of which it is a part. The phrase "Reform Jewish" would expand and affirm freedom, the term "Jewish" would constrict and deny freedom.

The third reason is that it is not possible in actual practice to apply the static rule. The static rule calls for the name "Jewish" to be applied to a theology in the present which is identical with a theology called "Jewish" in the past. A *sine qua non* of this rule, then, is that there *be* a past theology called Jewish to serve as the criterion of application. However, the past as investigated by the

science of Judaism does not give us a Jewish theology; rather, it gives us many theologies and God-concepts that have been called Jewish, not a few of which differ substantially from one another. What is the criterion we will use to determine which of these many past Jewish theologies will serve as the criterion for our use of the term Jewish? Will it be the theology and God-concept of Amos, based upon direct prophetic experience, which differs greatly from the theology of the Pharisees, based upon the tradition of a perfect and finished revelation to Moses? Yet both differ radically from Maimonides' concept of God, based as it is on negative theology and the primacy of reason. These examples can be multiplied tens of times. What has the theology of Mendelssohn to do with the Kabbalah, although both are called Jewish? Hence it is impossible, except arbitrarily, to select a past Jewish theology which will define our use of the term Jewish, and serve as the paradigm for application of the static rule.²

One further observation concerning the static rule: there is a procedure which masquerades as the application of this rule but which, on inspection, turns out to be just the contrary. This procedure, abstraction, attempts to bring in the static rule through the rear door. The argument is given that all theology called Jewish in the past has an essence which can be abstracted, for example, theism, and that "Jewish," therefore, is properly applied only to a theology which has this theistic characteristic. But the static rule requires *identity* between a past and present theology. If someone abstracts a concept like theism from complex religious systems such as those of the Jewish continuum, and says theism is their essence, he does not apply the past, he violates it. He introduces subjectively, on personal say-so, an entirely new element. Take the following case as an illustration. To the Pharisee and his descendants, the name "Jewish" is not applied to a theology because it is theistic; the theologies of Christianity and Islam are theistic too. "Jewish" is applied to a theology which *consists of a particular kind of theism* and accepts a *particular revelation*. Hence to deny the revelation and generalize away the specifically Pharisaic theism is not to keep the past and apply the static rule, but, on the contrary, to repudiate the past and change the very essence of Pharisaic Judaism.³

Moreover, abstraction as a name-giving principle does not work. If we say that the word "Jewish" is applied merely to a theology

that is theistic, then Christianity, Islam, and many other religions are Jewish. Surely, this is absurd. We were seeking a principle that would enable us to apply the name "Jewish" more accurately; instead we find that abstraction destroys whatever meaning "Jewish" may reasonably be understood to have. In other words, a rule based upon abstraction or "essence" that would be broad enough to include the entire Jewish continuum would be so general that theologies would be included which plainly are not Jewish; at the same time, this rule would be so arbitrary that theologies which are patently Jewish, such as those held by many Reform and Reconstructionist Jews, would be excluded.

Inasmuch as the static meaning of "Jewish" cannot be applied in Reform Judaism, I should like to propose another meaning for the word in the phrase "Reform Jewish theology." This meaning, which is open to development and progress, is, I think, implicit in some instances of past usage but not identical with any meaning of the past consciously given. We may term this meaning the *dynamic* use of the word "Jewish."

The dynamic meaning is derived from an understanding of the word "Jew" as an ontal symbol, a symbol that points to the problematic structure of man's being (*ontos*) and summons him to respond to finitude with authenticity. This understanding is based on a phenomenology of the human person which finds man to be a "problem" existent. The sense of the term "problem" as employed here is indicated by its etymology. *Problema* in Greek means "something thrown forward," that is, a question that is proposed for solution. The existence of man is not given to him as a thing, fully and at one time, but is thrown forward to him as a question of anxious interest demanding solution. Man cannot refuse to ask this question, although it engenders anxiety, for he is the question he asks. This question, bluntly stated, is, "I am finite, I crave infinity; what can I do, what should I do, what shall I do?" The conflict between the finite being of the human person and the infinite strivings of his will is sharp, penetrating to the core of his personality and constituting a threat to its unity and integrity. Finitude entails aloneness and death, whereas the finite person longs for unlimited relation and eternity. Man's response to the conflict between what he is and what he wishes to be, in other words, his response to finitude, is the definition I give to religion. The ontal symbol has the power of calling to being; it directs man to con-

stitutive decision and genuine religion. As an ontal symbol, the word "Jew" turns the one whom it names to the essential demand of his being, but, as an ontal symbol, *it summons merely to authentic response, not to any one particular response*. In a religious situation such as Reform Judaism, where the evidence for response is admittedly fallible and the autarchic individuality of each member affirmed, response is determined as authentic not by its agreement with dogma, but by the capacity of the response for resolving the individual finitude of the one who makes it.

The symbol "Jew" brings before man past and present possibilities of response. The possibilities produced by the past are evoked by the intrinsic association of *Jew* with the history that produced it: shall it be decided with the *Jew* Job that no Infinite disrupts the structure of finite being and that human existence is radically bounded by the limit of death, or shall it be decided with the *Jew* who is Pharisee that relation to an Infinite breaks the limits of finitude? The possibilities of the present are evoked by "Jew" as the name of a "now existent" whom it calls to authentic response. For the response of the "now existent" takes place in a concrete, present reality to which, if the response is *authentic*, it must be true.

Thus the meaning of the word "Jew" as ontal symbol is dynamic, not bound to the past as the static meaning is; it is heuristic, furthering investigation into the nature of man and his universe.⁴ Here lies the relation between the word "Jew" and theology. As ontal symbol, *the word "Jew" creates theology*, and the creation is therefore properly named after that which begets it. The ontal symbol creates theology by inducing the one over whom it has power to search for authentic response to his finitude. Authentic response is based on reality, and the concept of God, the product of theology, gives to man the characteristics of the real ultimately relevant to his finitude. Finitude, it may be said, raises the question of the infinite; theology provides the answer; religion is the individual's engaged response. "Jewish theology" in Reform Judaism is therefore defined as "the study of the meaning of the word 'God' produced by the finite being named 'Jew' who is called by his name to give authentic response to finitude."

IV

We come now to the third and final word of our subject, "God." Inasmuch as no authoritative or dogmatic definition of God can be laid down in Reform Judaism, and more than one concept is consistent with the essence of Reform, the discussion which follows is to be regarded primarily as an explanation of why I personally take the position I do rather than as a polemic against positions to which others are committed and which possess great value for them. Of course, in explaining why any position is taken, it is inevitable that reasons should be given why other positions have been rejected. Negation is an aspect of affirmation. Negation, however, is not the purpose of these remarks.

All inquiry into the reality and nature of a supposed existent begins with an examination of the ways of knowing. Even our brief investigation, therefore, cannot proceed directly to a statement about the reality and nature of God. Rather, as (I believe) all theology must, it starts with a consideration of the nature of evidence and the justification of belief. What is the evidence, if any, that is necessary to justify belief in a reality called God?

To begin with, let us consider the possibility that no evidence at all is to be required. It is evident that no proof can be brought to determine the question of evidence, inasmuch as that which constitutes proof is itself dependent upon the same question. No proof, therefore, can be brought that evidence is necessary; the choice of evidence is a starting point of inquiry. He who so wishes can state anything, affirm anything, or believe anything, without evidence. Such is the way of *ipse dixit* theology. After I have conceded this, however, it is my choice and conviction that evidence must be given to justify whatever reality reference is to be assigned the word "God." I have no quarrel with anyone who uses his freedom to deny that evidence is necessary, provided that he affirms my freedom to withhold serious consideration from any proposed reality meaning of God for which no evidence is given.⁵ The word "theology" literally means "science or knowledge of God" and, though the heart may not wish to know, thought must have its reasons. As Maimonides says in laying down the rules of evidence and the definition of faith which preface his inquiry into the nature of God:

Bear in mind that by "faith" we do not mean that which is uttered with the lips, but that which is apprehended by the (rational) soul, the conviction that the object [of belief] is exactly as it is conceived. If, as regards real or supposed truths, you content yourself with giving utterance to them in words, without conceiving them or believing in them, especially if you do not seek certainty, you have a very easy task, as, in fact, you will find many ignorant people who retain (the words of) beliefs (in their memory) without conceiving any idea with regard to them . . . belief is only possible after a thing is conceived; it consists in the conviction that the thing apprehended has its existence beyond the mind (in reality) exactly as it is conceived in the mind. . . . Renounce desires and habits, follow your reason . . . you will then be fully convinced of what we have said.⁶

Without evidence, there is no genuine conviction possible for man, the existent who, perhaps *malgré lui*, is committed to reality and endowed with reason.

The decision having been made that evidence is necessary to establish a reality reference for God, we must now weigh which of the two kinds of evidence generally accepted is to be required, subjective or objective evidence. The outstanding characteristic of our age regarding theological evidence is that the objective evidence which has in the past been employed to justify faith in a reality reference for the word "God" is now generally rejected, and particularly so among liberal religions. This is primarily the evidence described above under the first form of theology, infallible and authoritative revelation. But repudiated as well is the evidence of infallible and authoritative natural knowledge, described above under the second form of theology. The most striking consequence of this development is that the evidence which traditionally provided substantiation for that concept of God which I have called theistic absolutism has been discarded. Theistic absolutism, which, in the Jewish continuum, is subscribed to in its most rigorous form by Pharisaic or Orthodox Judaism, is the theory that the referent of the word "God" is an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent Being who reveals Himself to man.⁷ Those who reject the traditional evidence and wish to retain theistic absolutism must now resort to subjective evidence, which constitutes theology of the fourth form, since no theology of the

fifth form satisfactorily makes a case for this concept.⁸ Hence those theologians who vigorously affirm the validity of subjective evidence are primarily the ones who are committed to the concept of theistic absolutism. Owing to this present, intimate relation between subjective evidence and theistic absolutism, it is difficult to evaluate subjective evidence without touching on the latter as well.

A good description of the mode of subjective evidence predominantly subscribed to today is given by a prominent theologian:

The new and more empiricist apologetic that is replacing the traditional theistic proofs focuses attention upon the state of religious faith, and claims that this is a state which it is rational to be in, but which philosophical reasoning cannot put one in.

The state of faith, in its strongest instances, is that of someone who cannot help believing in God. He reports that he is conscious of God—not of course as an object in the world, but as a divine presence. In the Old Testament, for example, the prophets were aware of God as dealing with Israel through the vicissitudes of her national history. In the New Testament the disciples were conscious of God as acting towards them in and through Jesus, so that His attitudes towards the various men and women whom He met were God's attitudes towards those same people. And the contemporary man of faith is aware of existing in the unseen presence of God and of living his life within the sphere of a universal divine purpose.

Having thus pointed to a putative religious awareness, the new apologetic argues that this is no more in need of a philosophical proof of the reality of its object than is our perception of the physical world or of other people. The rationalist assumption is no more valid in relation to religious cognition than in relation to sense experience . . . the believer does not reason from his religious experience to God but is conscious of God Himself . . . the central claim of the new type of apologetic is that it is rational for someone who believes himself to be aware of God, and who finds himself linked in this belief with a long-lived community of faith, to trust his religious awareness and to proceed to base his life upon it.⁹

Inasmuch as the points usually made in favor of subjective evidence as the basis of theology are ably summarized in these comments, an analysis of their contents will serve as a critique of

subjective evidence generally.¹⁰ If subjective evidence is found wanting by this critique, as I believe it is, then no alternative is left but to select objective evidence of the fifth form as the justification necessary to establish a reality reference for the word God.

It appears to me that there are four major difficulties with subjective evidence. First, once the principle is affirmed that such evidence is valid, then the subjective evidence of any and every person is validated. If everyone's subjective evidence is valid, how is a choice to be made between two conflicting statements on the nature of God and religion, both of which are supported by subjective evidence? How does one choose between the God and religion of the pre-exilic prophets, which knows of no Trinity, Messiah, resurrection, and immortality, and a religion such as Christianity which affirms the Trinity and a Messiah, and makes afterlife the goal and purpose of human existence? Surely, unless reason and the law of contradiction are to be dismissed, these religions cannot both be true. It is possible, I suppose, for a person to claim that his own subjective evidence testifies to its own validity and tells him as well which other subjective evidence is valid. But this seems arbitrary and unconvincing. It resembles, in fact, a claim to prophecy. Subjective evidence, then, does not seem to provide a much better criterion for determining truth than no evidence at all. One of the principal reasons for requiring evidence is to judge among truth claims, but the theology of subjective evidence seems to serve this purpose no better than *ipse dixit* theology.

Second, if the believer "is conscious of God Himself," how is it, for example, that the pre-exilic prophets' and Jesus' concepts of the nature of God differ so? And why does the Muslim experience Allah; the Christian, Jesus; and the Hindu, Brahma? The analogy between religious cognition and sense perception is surely farfetched. Few will disagree, I am sure, that the tree the prophet sees will answer to Jesus' notion of a tree and to ours as well, yet for people ostensibly experiencing the same "presence," their notions of deity and religion differ greatly indeed.

Third, one of the conclusions of Sigmund Freud's investigations was that the experience of "presence" which some report as confrontation with the deity is actually to be understood as an experience of self objectified and projected outward. How, in this

Freudian age, can it be considered "rational" to accept "presence" *ipso facto* as consciousness of "God Himself"? It would appear, rather, that one of the prime methodological principles in a theology acceptable to our time would be the recognition that "presences" per se are to be presumed projections of the unconscious.

Fourth, the concept of God which the experience of "presence" is usually taken to substantiate is theistic absolutism. This is the concept of a Being whose nature has consequences for the world we experience. A universe created and governed by an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent Being may be expected to display the marks of its perfect source. Thus the apprehension of "presence" is clearly not adequate by itself to demonstrate the truth of this concept; it must be proved coherent with the facts of the universe as well. We all grant, I suppose, the existence of "presences"; the great problem is the world of brute fact. Many of our experiences are incoherent with theistic absolutism; the most critical of these is, of course, the experience of surd evil. If the facts could be brought into harmony with the concept of theistic absolutism, "presence" theology would have no difficulty in finding acceptance.¹¹ Yet the medievals, who considered their concept of God supported by indubitable evidence, gave more attention to the problem of its congruence with the external world than many theologians of today whose primary evidence is the ambiguous "presence."

My conclusion from these considerations is that subjective evidence is not competent to establish a real Being, that is, a reality reference for the word "God." Before leaving the matter of subjective evidence, however, I should like to stress three points. First, to repeat my opinion stated earlier, theology based upon subjective evidence is appropriate to Reform Judaism only if such theology is understood to be non-authoritative. Second, the use of "presence" to which I object is as primary evidence for a concept of deity; I have no objection to the use of "presence" as corroborative evidence for a divine reality established by other than subjective means, or as a symbol referring to a reality so established. Third, not all forms of theism are established by subjective evidence; the exponents of theistic finitism, for example, appeal in the main to objective evidence.

V

The form of theology to which, I believe, we now must come is the pursuit of a reality reference for God based on objective evidence of the kind earlier classified as the basis of theology of the fifth form. For many, the primary difficulty regarding this form of theology is that the objective evidence presently available does not substantiate the concept of theistic absolutism. Their disappointment is understandable but, to the objectivist, constitutes no rebuttal of truth. The objectivist employs a strict standard of evidence precisely because he is aware of man's infinite strivings and the screen they place between him and reality. Genuine religion, as he understands it, is to have God shape his inner life and not the contrary. Thus, far from being that which religion should avoid, reality objectively determined provides the basis of true religion and the source of salvation. For authentic response to finitude, which constitutes true religion, must be based upon reality; salvation is nothing other than the state such response produces.

Moreover, while subjective theology is consistent with the essence of Reform Judaism, objective theology is more than consistent, it is also coherent, fitting naturally with the origins and spirit of Reform. Reform Judaism came into existence as a result of the conclusion that Scripture is fallible, the work (at least in part) of man. This conclusion was reached through critical and objective study, the science of Judaism applied to Scripture. Is it not natural to apply this same method to the theology of Reform Judaism as well?

There are several theories of truth based upon objective evidence. Since it would take us far afield to enter upon the intricacies of reflection involved in selecting one theory over another, it will suffice for my purpose merely to indicate the one to which I subscribe. This is the theory that a proposition concerning the external world is true if it is empirically verifiable. I do not believe—unlike those who generally subscribe to empirical verifiability as the criterion of truth—that there is no direct knowledge of one's self. That I believe such knowledge is possible is clear, inasmuch as it is the knowledge on which the ontal symbol and authentic response to finitude is based. However, I accept empiri-

cal verifiability as the arbiter of truth concerning the external world, and, seeing that God understood as a real being is a fact of the external world, our theory of truth must be one that pertains to knowledge of this world. A brief (and general) formulation of the notion of empirical verifiability can be stated as follows: "A proposition or series of propositions concerning the external world will be true if there are predictable and observable consequences of such a proposition or propositions." Hence the test that a reality definition of God must meet is empirical verifiability. If there are empirical consequences of the proposition "God exists," the proposition will be true; if there are not, the proposition will be meaningless or false.

The definition of "God" I propose, in accordance with the foregoing, is: "God is the enduring possibility of being." Inasmuch as being is analyzable without remainder into sense-data and self-data, the existence of God is verified whenever sense-data and self-data are experienced, and the existence of God is disproved when, under equivalent conditions of personal normalcy, self-data are experienced and sense-data are not. God is the enduring possibility of being rather than of sense experience alone because the person (that is, the continuing self-consciousness that is constructed out of self-data) is evidently dependent upon the external world (sense-data and the unobservables reducible to sense-data), and with the annihilation of the external world, the annihilation of the person would necessarily follow.

The concept of God as the enduring possibility of being belongs to the class of theologies that may generally be subsumed under the heading of "finitist theologies." Quite different theologies are grouped together under this heading, but all possess the common characteristic that God is not regarded as perfect, "perfection" being defined by the largely imaginary standard of "having every desirable attribute." For the most part, the imperfection attributed to deity in finitist theologies relates to the divine power, that is, the inability of God to overcome the force of evil, which may originate within the Godhead or outside it. In the concept of God as the enduring possibility of being, the divine imperfection goes beyond this, to the essential nature of the divine existence.

Two classes of existence, each with its distinctive nature, can be distinguished: the possible and the actual. Possible existence is defective in that it lacks actuality. As possibility, it is neither a

sense-datum nor a self-datum. Yet if the divine existence is to be infinite in duration, it can be this only as possibility. For the actually existent is always limited; nothing unlimited can be sensed or imagined, let alone conceived. To be actual is to be finite. While the finity of every actuality is present in all the spheres of its existence, it is temporal finity that provides the definitive boundary. The actual is finite in time because, as an actuality, it is finite in the power of endurance and destined, therefore, as an individual, to annihilation. Being thus breeds nothingness; indeed, *nothing* has no meaning except in relation to being. Accordingly, if God is to be infinite in duration, the divine existence must forego actuality for possibility. We find therefore that God is infinite in duration but possesses only possible existence, whereas being is finite in duration but possesses actual existence. Metaphorically speaking, existence, the act of overcoming nothingness, lays down conditions on all that would possess it. As a consequence, nothingness is never entirely overcome. Actual existents temporarily overcome nothingness at the cost of future and total annihilation. God overcomes nothingness by incorporating it into the divine existence and, in so doing, is emptied of actuality and must forever remain possibility. The divine existence, so to speak, is a compromise between being and nothingness; the ground of being overcomes nothingness to exist as the enduring possibility of being, but in the uneasy victory defect is assimilated into the Godhead.

The understanding of God's existence as the enduring possibility of being leads to a further consequence: God cannot exist without the world. God has no meaning without being; being has no endurance without God. God's existence is not absolute; the enduring possibility of being exists as a correlative of being. The world was not created by an absolute God who arbitrarily willed it so; rather the world exists because the divine existence is unconditionally dependent upon it. Of creation *ex nihilo*, we have no knowledge. In experience, God coexists with finite entities in a process of continuous interaction. In this process, as we are justified in concluding from the regular and orderly nature of causal sequence, the possibility of future being is derived from present being. The existence of God is, so to speak, derived from every present moment of being and realized in every future moment.

A further consequence of God's nature as possibility is the rela-

tion that obtains between God and man. In this view of God, where the divine is subject to the conditions of existence, it is the nature of actual entities, by virtue of the finity or encompassing boundary that gives them their existence, to be cut off from the ground of their being. To be actual is to be alone. To be finite is to be severed from the infinite. Hence the relation between God and man is one of muted communication. Accordingly, as Reform Judaism teaches, there exists no infallible or verbal revelation nor can there be such revelation, because man, necessarily and substantially separated from the ground of being, has no sure relation to this ground. Equally, the perfect providence of theistic absolutism, its Messiahs and magical eschatologies, have no place in a world where the infinite exists only as possibility, and the actual world is always finite.

Yet if God cannot overcome man's finity, man is not powerless. The possibilities that constitute the Godhead can be influenced and even altered by man. Every individual decision that resolves the pain of finitude increases the possibility of pleasurable being in the future; every social decision that helps resolve the pain of injustice and poverty increases the possibility of social betterment in the future; every scientific discovery becomes a power for the future. If man wills it, God conserves all the value that is possible. This relation of action and passion between man and God may be viewed symbolically as a covenant, an ethics of hypothetical necessity: "If man acts, then God reacts" or, "As man acts, so God reacts." In the words of the prophet Amos:

Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live;
And so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as ye say.
Hate the evil, and love the good,
And establish justice in the gate;
It may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,
Will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph.¹²

This covenant, in which man must do the good to receive the good, is to be sharply distinguished from magical covenants with deity, in which man is required to perform some act irrelevant to the good—ritualistic, emotional, or otherwise—and God, without prior and competent causes, miraculously produces the good.

The absence of an infallible and verbal revelation is only part of the larger problem of evil, the great complex of events and

conditions that beset and anguish human existence. Evil comes both from events outside man and from conditions within him. The human person, relative to the problems the world presents him, is not only inherently deficient intellectually, lacking certainty in his knowledge and absoluteness in his ethics, but is constitutionally deficient emotionally and physically as well. These deficiencies keep man from perfect and permanent solutions to any real problem and provide a constant threat to the very meaning of his existence. In no way can evil be accounted for satisfactorily by theological absolutism. This includes not only theistic absolutism, but pantheistic absolutism as well, such as we find, for example, in Spinozism. The Whole that is Substance cannot contain the evils of the world and be meaningfully pronounced perfect, any more than the omniscient and omnipotent Creator can be meaningfully pronounced perfect. The Whole exists in and through its parts and cannot escape the defects of their nature, just as the absolute Creator is responsible for his creatures and cannot escape the consequences of their acts. In the theology of divine possibility, there is, I feel, a coherent explanation of evil. Evil is the inevitable result of the nature of God and the nature of man. Evil is not willed into existence, it is a necessary concomitant of existence. The choice, figuratively stated, is not between a world with evil and a world without it, but between a world with evil and no world at all.

Two principles in the theology of divine possibility primarily serve to explain evil. The first is that all actual being is necessarily finite. Every actual thing will in every way be limited; nothing real endures eternally. This does not mean that meliorism is unrealistic and melioration cannot occur; it can and does, but melioration is all that can occur. No final triumph over limitation and nothingness is possible. The second principle is that God, the divine possibility, can offer only for realization in the future the possibilities that reside in the being of the present. God, in other words, is not an independent absolute agent who can miraculously produce the good *ex nihilo*; the divine existence can present for realization in the future only that which has been made possible in the past. Together, these two principles, that the "present" or world of actualities is always limited, and that the future can be created only out of possibilities derived from a present that is

limited, offer an explanation of the pervasive presence of evil in the world.

The theology of divine possibility is offered as a theology appropriate to and coherent with Reform Judaism. Out of his freedom a Reform Jew may accept or reject it. However, a theology is to be rejected on valid grounds, and there are two kinds of objections that I feel are not valid. The first is the objection which argues that a theology must satisfy the infinite wishes of man and provide him with unlimited consolation. This argument is invalid, not only because it is historically unsound so far as the Jews are concerned, but because it is based upon a misconception of theology in particular and religion in general. The purpose of theology is truth, and the purpose of religion is to enable man to live authentically with that truth. Hence truth is the only relevant and necessary justification of a theology. The second objection bases the value of a theology upon the number of divine mysteries it reveals, as though the adequacy of a theology resided not in its quality as truth but in its quantity. As Maimonides so profoundly taught, a theology is as important for that which it negates as for that which it affirms. The worship of false gods is idolatry, and if a theology should serve to keep men from idolatry, even though, as in the case of Maimonides' theology, it should tell him nothing of the essence of God, then it will have accomplished a great good. Throughout history, there has been a special fury attached to the deeds of those who have acted in the name of false gods, and who have rationalized, through idolatry, despotic and tyrannical urges that were solely their own. The theology of divine possibility as a negative theology serves the moral role of denying divinity to anything finite, regardless of the basis upon which the quality of divinity is claimed, whether through revelation or incarnation.

We should note, although we cannot fully develop the point here, that the theology of divine possibility holds significant beliefs in common with important Jewish systems of the past. Its affinity with the negative theory of Maimonides, and with Amos' covenantal concept of God's role in the conservation of the good, has already been mentioned. Moreover, since we find that God alone as possibility is permanent, and that all actual being is momentary and limited, the response to finitude that is pointed to

is the response of all biblical Jewish systems: that we accept death and the inevitable cessation of all being. The fact of evil, resulting as it does from the necessary limitations of existence, should bring us, as symbolically it brought Job, not to despair but to the meaningful awareness that the divine possibility reacts to acts of value and conserves all possible good. Yet there is a stern overtone to the concept of God as possibility. As possibility God cannot produce the concrete realization of human good; this, of necessity, is left to man. Should man in this strange age fail, then we must agree with Amos and the author of the story of Noah that God does not require for his existence any particular people, species, or world. While it is true that God without a world has no meaning or existence, the infinite divine temporality does not require any particular class of finite beings for existence. The awesome choice, whether man is to be included in this class, is left to man himself.

Still, in conclusion, I must confess my belief that we are tending toward an excellent time in the affairs of men. Radical novelty lies ahead. Man stands at the dawn of the post-Christian, post-Orthodox era in religion. Compelling evidence for these religious systems is now gone, and the effects of this loss should continue to be felt more and more generally. The recent bursts of theological irrationality, as exemplified in aspects of Christian existentialism, the various neo-Orthodoxies, and the fantastic "Death of God" school, are not only telling evidence of what occurs when disciplined and objective evidence for faith is not employed, but the usual *fin de siècle* sentiments expressed when an era dies. Reform Judaism as a polydoxy offers a prototype of the religious structure that is possible in a world given to objective evidence and scientific method. In a world from which poverty is banished, in which sickness of mind and body is diminished and man is politically free, a religion will be accepted not because men are afraid, nor in extreme need of consolation, but because it is true. Inasmuch as there is no way now or in the foreseeable future to determine truth absolutely, man will need freedom to find his religious truth. This Reform Judaism affirms and allows. True to its polydox essence, Reform Judaism is the religion for tomorrow, as it is now the religion for today.

NOTES

1. I have epitomized such a philosophy in *Meet the American Jew* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1963), pp. 29 ff.

2. It is interesting to note that the totality of the Jewish continuum as revealed by the science of Judaism is itself polydox, containing varied and mutually exclusive theologies. Only a polydox Judaism in the present can offer the entire past (within the broad limits set by the logic of polydoxy) as possibilities for choice and decision. This is accomplished through the word "Jew" as ontal symbol.

3. If anything may be abstracted as an "essence" or abiding characteristic of the Jewish continuum, let me suggest the rational ethical principle that authority over other persons must be based on infallible knowledge objectively demonstrated. Therefore, only on the basis of a revelation publicly and perfectly received from the creator God who, *ipso facto*, has power over all creatures can you have orthodoxy and obligatory belief. If this characteristic is taken as the "essence of Judaism," then the same "essence" is present in Reform, when we say that without such infallible knowledge we can have only polydoxy. See my article, "Polydoxy and Modern Judaism," *CCAR Journal*, January 1965, and "Authority in Reform Judaism," *CCAR Journal*, April 1960.

4. The meaning of the word "Jew" as ontal symbol can, and perhaps in fact always will, coexist with other meanings, aesthetic, cultural, political, and so forth. The point here is that it must be the fundamental meaning in Reform Judaism. The other meanings are subsidiary; either instrumental or accidental "handmaidens," so to speak, that serve this meaning. The word "Jew" without the meaning of ontal symbol collapses into comparative triviality. The threat of triviality is, I believe, the central problem of Reconstructionism.

5. Without the affirmation of such freedom, the arbitrary and anti-rational nature of *ipse dixit* theology lends itself to tyranny. It is also difficult to see how dialogue can be established with someone who has no reasons to offer for his faith.

6. Maimonides, *Moreh Nebukhim*, I, 50.

7. Revelation is, I think, implicit in the most rigorous form of theistic absolutism but, strictly speaking, theistic absolutism does not entail revelation.

8. Neither does all evidence of the fourth form verify theistic absolutism, e.g., the Buberian "I-Thou" does not, neither does mystic union.

9. John H. Hick, *Saturday Review*, February 6, 1965.

10. The Buberian "I-Thou" is subject to similar (as well as other) criticism, but requires special consideration which cannot be given here.

11. "Presence" theology has on its side the fact that the concept of God it wishes to establish allows the most "pleasurable" response to finitude.

12. Amos 5:14 f.