

Polydox Judaism: A Statement

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IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE, as the adherents of Polydox Judaism increase, and the Institute of Creative Judaism, the research and development organization that specifically serves Polydox Judaism (and liberal Judaism generally) gains in strength, that a growing interest in the nature of Polydox Judaism should be evinced. This growing interest has brought with it questions and critical discussion that deserve attention. In this statement, I will deal with a number of the more significant issues that have been raised. Although Rabbi Bruce Warshal's article in this issue of the *Journal of Reform Judaism* (pp. 39–46) is the immediate occasion for offering these remarks, I will address the subject of Polydox Judaism systematically, so that this statement basically stands alone.¹ The method I will employ is to offer a series of numbered paragraphs, each of which pinpoints one of the issues under discussion. It is not my fundamental intent in presenting this statement to provide the argumentation for the various propositions that make up my position (this has been done elsewhere and would be too lengthy for our purpose here), but to clarify the basic position and to provide references to those places where the subject may be further pursued.

One preliminary comment is called for. There is no need for me to deny that I have concealed or attempted to obscure my own position or the nature of Polydox Judaism; anyone even slightly acquainted with my life and work knows that just the opposite is the case.² What I wish to call attention to is the reason why I have insisted upon full and public disclosure of the nature of Polydox Judaism to colleagues and the general Jewish community alike. This is that I am convinced the very survival of a modern Jewish community, not to say its authenticity, is dependent upon all liberal Jews, which in-

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cludes Reform Jews, arriving at the understanding that Polydoxy is the fundamental principle that underlies their various Judaism. For Polydoxy is not only a unifying principle that brings together all liberal Jews, but even more, Polydoxy allows the freedom and creativity necessary to provide the new forms of Jewish religious expression that our age demands. Thus no greater disservice could have been done Reform Judaism than to hide from Reform its own true Polydoxy nature. It was for this reason that the Institute of Creative Judaism was established. In various publications of the Institute of Creative Judaism, I, and others, have explicitly formulated the basic principles of Polydox Judaism; we have developed, in addition, educational texts and liturgy that concretize and actualize these principles.³

1. *The nature of Polydox Judaism:* Polydox Judaism is a religion of ultimate personal freedom. In Polydox Judaism, persons have the right to accept only beliefs of whose truth they are convinced, and to keep only practices whose observance they find meaningful. All other beliefs and practices may rightfully be rejected. Accordingly, adherents of Polydox Judaism may legitimately and properly hold different views regarding the word God,⁴ the nature of revelation, or the existence of an afterlife. The fundamental principle of Polydoxy may be stated in terms of a covenant, the Freedom Covenant: Every adherent of Polydox Judaism pledges to affirm the freedom of all other adherents in return for their pledges to affirm her or his own. Equally binding in Polydox Judaism is the corollary of the Freedom Covenant: Every person's freedom ends where the other person's freedom begins.

2. *The religious history of the Jews:* Critically examined, Jewish religious history reveals that the Jews (including in this term for brevity Hebrews and Israelites) have subscribed to a number of different religions, including such mutually exclusive systems as the polytheistic henotheism of ancient Israel, the ethical monotheism of the pre-exilic prophets, Sadduceeism, Pharisaism, and medieval philosophic rationalism. (A rule of thumb for determining that two or more religions are different is that their essential principles cannot be believed by one coherent mind at the same time.) Does this fact of different religious systems among the Jews mean that the Jewish religious past has been Polydox? The answer is "no." The individual religions of the Jewish past have all been orthodox and authoritarian: each requiring that its adherents accept only its own essential beliefs regarding such basic subjects as the meaning of the word God, the nature and content of revelation, and the existence of an afterlife; and

each requiring that its members keep only its own fundamental practices. A group of diverse orthodox, authoritarian Jewish religious systems and communities, each of which denies its members their individual religious freedom and each of which denies validity to other Jewish religious systems, does not constitute a Polydox Judaism.⁵ To think otherwise is profoundly to misunderstand Polydox Judaism. For in Polydox Judaism, the individual members of the same Jewish religious community are affirmed in their freedom.⁶ The plain and irrefutable fact is that, until the advent of Polydox Judaism, no Jewish religious system had ever affirmed the ultimate religious freedom of its adherents. Moreover, the spirit of Polydoxy affirms the valid Jewishness of all other Jewish religious systems and communities.

3. *The nature of religion:* The definition of religion to which I subscribe may be concisely stated as follows: "Religion is the response of human persons to the psychic conflict that arises within them between awareness of their finity and their infinite desires."⁷ Human persons, bounded and limited (for example, subject to death), yearn to be what they are not, unbounded and unlimited. This conflict between the awareness of one's finity on the one hand and infinite desire on the other will be referred to henceforth as "finitude." Religion, then, is the human person's response to finitude. The fundamental point to be made regarding the conflict of finitude is that, when unresolved in a person, the conflict produces negative psychic states of such intensity (for example, anxiety and melancholy) that the ultimate meaning of existence is annihilated. Such a state of meaninglessness is intolerable and calls for the human person to respond to it. The function of religion is to provide a response that resolves the conflict of finitude and thus brings the person to a state of ultimate meaningful existence. This state of ultimate meaningful existence that religion brings about is termed *soteria*.

4. *The general categories of religion:* There are three general categories of religion or responses to finitude: the infinite response; the discognitive response; and the finite response. The infinite response is characterized by the belief that the human person, despite the appearance of being finite, is in fact infinite. The discognitive response deals with the conflict of finitude by obscuring from consciousness either knowledge of the conflict or knowledge of the intolerable anguish it produces. The finite response resolves the conflict of finitude by the acceptance of finity and the renunciation of infinite desire.⁸ Having thus described the general nature of religion and its three major categories, it is quite clear that I do not consider

“belief” or “rationalism” necessary elements of religion. There are responses, as for example, among the discognitive responses to finitude, in which the person responds to finitude by “nescience,” not knowing or believing. Moreover, in Polydox Judaism, a person has the right to employ any of the three major categories of religion to respond to finitude, the infinite, the discognitive, or the finite. Accordingly, just as “belief” and “rationalism” are not necessary elements of religion in general, so I do not consider them necessary elements of the Judaism to which I subscribe.⁹

5. *Jewish religion and Jewish community*: The fundamental purpose of Jewish religions is to provide Jews with responses to finitude that enable them to attain soteria, the state of ultimate meaningful existence. What is the fundamental purpose of Jewish community? It is, I believe, to provide Jews with Jewish religion. It is clear that in the historical past Jewish communities, whether possessing political independence or existing as part of other countries, understood Jewish religion to be their fundamental purpose and the ultimate justification for their existence. The story of Sinai in the Pentateuch is the paradigm case that illustrates this point. The Israelites organized into a united community in order to attain soteria by entering into a covenant with Yahveh. Jewish religion, therefore, was the reason for their community. Throughout the long history of the Jews, until approximately the nineteenth century, Jewish religions have come and gone, but Jewish communities always maintained that their particular Jewish religious systems provided the fundamental purpose and justification for their communities’ existence. Accordingly, the position of the medieval Jewish philosophers that Jewish community has for its fundamental purpose Jewish religion, and that non-religious Jewish ethnicity or nationalism are by-products of Jewish religion, is historically accurate. The historical Jewish view that the ultimate purpose of Jewish community is to provide its members with Jewish religions that produce soteria is, I personally believe, correct. Non-religious Jewish ethnicity and nationalism can and often do serve necessary and valuable purposes. These purposes are, however, secondary. Moreover, there is a further point to be made regarding the fundamental importance of Jewish religion for Jewish community. It is my profound conviction that no Jewish community can continue to exist in the long term as a Jewish entity without providing its members with a relevant Judaism, that is, a Jewish religion that provides them personally with soteria. The crisis of existence in which the Jews find themselves, not only in America but worldwide, stems, I believe, directly from the fact that most, if

not the overwhelming majority of Jews, find the religions of the conventional Jewish religious institutions do not provide them with soteria and are thus irrelevant to their ultimate concerns. Non-religious ethnicism in America is simply the remnant of the now obsolete religions of the Jewish conventional institutions and is not by itself self-regenerating or capable of bringing about the future survival of the Jewish community. Needless to say, I believe Polydox Judaism does provide the modern Jew with a relevant Jewish religion that can bring about the continued existence of Jewish community in the modern world. My only fear is that the American Jewish community may decline to a point beyond saving before the enormous task of producing all the materials a Polydox Judaism requires are completed.

6. *Reform Judaism and Polydox Judaism compared:* The basic difference between Reform Judaism and Polydox Judaism is that Polydoxy has been formally defined and its essential principles determined.¹⁰ Reform, on the other hand, has never been formally defined. Although Reform Judaism lacks formal definition, various definitions have been proposed. Two are of interest here.

a. The first may be termed the orthodox, traditionoid definition. This is that Reform Judaism is an orthodox monotheistic religion essentially similar to Pharisaic or Rabbinic Judaism. This view of Reform Judaism is expressed in the literal meanings of the service books issued by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the new *Gates of Prayer* and the older *Union Prayer Book*, and generally, in the educational material produced by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

b. The second definition of Reform Judaism that has been proposed is that its fundamental principles are identical with those of Polydox Judaism.¹¹ This is the definition to which I subscribe. For clarity's sake, those who subscribe to the definition of Reform Judaism as identical with Polydox Judaism may be referred to as Polydox Reform Jews. Jews who are not Reform Jews and who subscribe to Polydox Judaism are referred to simply as Polydox Jews.¹²

7. *Authority in Reform Judaism and Polydox Judaism:* The term authority as used here means the right and power to command and compel obedience. Applied concretely to a religious community, authority means that the leaders of the community have the right to command the community's members which beliefs to accept and which practices to observe, and to compel their obedience. Authority does not exist in Reform Judaism,¹³ and it cannot exist in Polydox

Judaism.¹⁴ The absence of authority in Reform Judaism has the logical and moral consequence that every member of the Reform community is free or autonomous.¹⁵ For, inasmuch as authority does not exist in the Reform community, no person or group of persons in Reform has the right to command the obedience of other members of the community. This, in turn, means every Reform Jew stands within the presumption of her or his freedom. In concrete terms, the absence of authority in Reform Judaism means that no person, rabbinic or lay, has the right to command or compel other members of the community to accept any particular belief or observe any particular practice. Thus, all members of the Reform community, children and adults, have the right to determine for themselves their own beliefs and practices.

8. *Birth dogma*: Birth dogma is a concept that originates in the Bible and pervades the Halachah, particularly the sections relating to domestic relations law. The concept of birth dogma, broadly stated, is the view that a person born into a religious community is required by virtue of such birth to accept as true and valid the beliefs and practices of the community into which she or he is born.¹⁶ Orthodox Judaism, and Conservative Judaism generally, in their beliefs and practices follow the concept of birth dogma. Thus, in Orthodoxy and Conservatism, Jews are not born free, but are born obligated to obey the commandments laid down by the leadership of the Orthodox and Conservative communities.

9. *Birth dogma and religious education*: The concept of birth dogma has fundamental consequences for religious education. In a community for which birth dogma is an accepted fundamental religious principle, the most appropriate method for communicating information about the community's religion is indoctrination. As employed here, there are a number of components to indoctrinal instruction, several of which bear mentioning.

a. Indoctrination is first of all uncritical. It does not provide available arguments or evidence against the position it presents. Nor does it provide available alternatives and supporting arguments or evidence for the alternatives.

b. Indoctrinal instruction does not encourage, and often does not permit, the student to question the truth and validity of the material that is presented.

c. Religious indoctrination generally appeals for acceptance of its doctrine to emotions, feelings such as loyalty, guilt and even fear,

which have nothing to do with the truth or validity of the information being presented.

10. *Birth dogma and Reform religious education:* The birth dogma concept and indoctrinal instruction are widely prevalent in Reform religious schools and even in adult study groups. Unfortunately, the birth dogma concept (that Jews are born unfree, obligated to accept their community's beliefs and practices) and indoctrination are absolutely improper in Reform. Two reasons among others may be given for this. First, Reform does not have the authority to lay down birth dogma obligations upon its people. A Reform Jew thus is born free. Second, indoctrination, inasmuch as it takes away or impairs a person's ability to make a free choice, is a subtle form of authoritarianism that commands and compels obedience. Such authoritarianism cannot be morally justified in Reform Judaism. Moreover, birth dogma indoctrinal instruction has proved itself a failure. Orthodoxy, Conservatism and Reform have all been employing birth dogma indoctrination since the Jews have come to America. The inescapable result is that American Jewry is in a crisis of existence, and those disaffected are the Jews, young and old, who have been subjected to birth dogma indoctrination. The reason is clear: in a society that is politically, educationally and culturally free, religions whose beliefs and practices are irrelevant and invalid will not be able to convince their people otherwise through birth dogma indoctrination. If anything, birth dogma indoctrination, which I believe is immoral in Reform Judaism, only deepens the sense of alienation from their institutional religions that so many Jews feel.

11. *Polydox Reform Judaism and religious education:* It is difficult to see how a religious community can have as its first axiom of religious education anything other than the imperative that its people must be told the truth as it knows it. Freedom is the truth of Reform Judaism, and the Reform Jewish community must know this. If the members of Reform have the freedom and right to leave the Jewish community, they must be informed of that fact. But awareness that one has freedom will not cause an exodus from Reform. (Certainly, birth dogma indoctrination has not stopped the massive flow of Jews from the American Jewish community.) What will continue the serious problems of Reform is the failure to become a relevant religion for the modern Jew. I have only one prescription to offer. This is for Reform Judaism to recognize that its logical and moral destiny requires it to be a polydoxy, and that Reform openly and

authentically acknowledges this truth. Once Reform genuinely accepts its nature as a polydoxy and then makes productive use of the freedom and creativity such awareness bestows, Reform will be able to arrive at the new beliefs, rituals and holidays that are necessary to provide the modern Jew with a relevant Judaism. In short, the only Judaism that will survive in the future is one that merits survival, a Judaism that provides the individual Jew with the freedom to choose a personal response to finitude that enables her or him to attain soteria, ultimate meaningful existence. Polydox Judaism does this; and it is Polydox Reform Judaism that Reform Judaism must become to endure in the problematic future that lies ahead.

NOTES

¹I am grateful to Dr. Bernard Martin, editor of the *Journal of Reform Judaism*, for extending an invitation to me to make this statement.

²B. S. Warshal, "Alvin Reines' Understanding of Judaism," n. 5; *Journal of Reform Judaism*, p. 45. Rabbi Warshal states that I have hidden my personal views in the footnotes of my article, "Birth Dogma and Philosophical Religious Faith," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 1975, pp. 297-329. The reason my personal contemporary philosophic observations have been placed in footnotes is that article's primary purpose was to analyze a medieval philosophic problem. Accordingly, any points that did not serve this primary purpose were relegated to the footnotes. See the following note.

³Rabbi Warshal appears to be entirely unaware of my explicit discussions of the nature of Polydox Judaism that have appeared in the Institute of Creative Judaism journal, *Polydoxy*, as well as in other publications of the Institute of Creative Judaism. This may be why he relies so on footnotes (see n. 2, above) for information regarding my position.

⁴In the course of their religious history, the Jews have subscribed to all the major categories of views regarding the word God. All these views are open to the Polydox Jew. See *Polydoxy, Journal of the Institute of Creative Judaism*, Vol. 4, No. 1.

⁵B. S. Warshal, *ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶Owing to the freedom it affirms, Polydox Judaism makes all the different beliefs of the various past Jewish religious systems available as options to the liberal Jew. Thus the Jewish religious past becomes a living treasure house for the present.

⁷This definition first appeared in my essay, "God and Jewish Theology," that appeared in *Contemporary Reform Jewish Thought*, ed. Bernard Martin (Chicago, 1968), p. 73. The definition appears in greatly expanded form in "The Word Religion," *Polydoxy, Journal of the Institute of Creative Judaism*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1979.

⁸Both the finite and the infinite responses to finitude have been subscribed to in the course of Jewish religious history. For example, Sadduceeism requires the finite response; Pharisaism requires the infinite response. As has been stated, both responses are open to Polydox Jews.

⁹Rabbi Warshal somehow concludes that, like the medieval philosophers generally, my personal position is that religion and "Judaism" require "belief" and "rationalism." I trust that this misunderstanding has now been rectified.

¹⁰*Polydomy, Journal of the Institute of Creative Judaism*, Vol. 3, Nos. 2/3, 1978.

¹¹See my article, "Reform Judaism," in *Meet The American Jew*, (Broadman Press, 1963, pp. 29ff.), reproduced in *Elements in a Philosophy of Reform Judaism*, Alvin J. Reines (The Institute of Creative Judaism Press, 1976), pp. 20–36.

¹²It is important to note that *The Gates of Prayer* and the educational materials of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, owing to their orthodox traditionoid nature, are generally unsuitable for Polydox Reform Jews and Polydox Jews. The Institute of Creative Judaism produces liturgy and educational material specifically designed for Polydox use. See "The Common Service: Shabbat as a State of Being," *Elements in a Philosophy of Reform Judaism*, Alvin J. Reines, pp. 84ff.; and *The Patriarchal Family*, A. J. Reines and Hera G. Reines (The Institute of Creative Judaism Press), 1975, Introduction.

¹³Alvin J. Reines, "Authority in Reform Judaism," *CCAR Journal*, April, 1960. This article is reproduced in *Elements in a Philosophy of Reform Judaism*, pp. 1–8; Sidney Regner, "The Quest for Authority in Reform Judaism," *The Journal of Reform Judaism*, 1979, Vol. XXVI, No. 3, pp. 29–37.

¹⁴In Polydox Judaism, the denial of authority is an explicitly stated fundamental principle.

¹⁵The remainder of the paragraph addresses authority in Reform Judaism; in Polydomy the point regarding freedom made with respect to Reform Judaism is firmly established and requires no further discussion here.

¹⁶See my article, "Birth Dogma and Philosophic Religious Faith, A Philosophic Inquiry," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. XLVI, 1975, pp. 297–329.