



Credo

Among the facts of life generally left unstated and unexamined in contemporary America, particularly in the Jewish community, is that religious communities, like all human organizations, possess political structures. This neglect is unfortunate, because the political structure of a religious community is of fundamental importance to all whose interest the community affects, and who should be aware, consequently, of its structure and functioning. The religious political structure determines where authority lies, and who possesses the power to make decisions regarding the community's beliefs and practices, as well as the allocation, use, and expenditure of community resources and funds. These are decisions, certainly, that touch the lives of all the religious community's members. Yet despite increased political awareness and sophistication generally, the political structures of religious community receive little attention. With the emergence of the concept of polydox religion, however, it is necessary to bring the subject of religious political structures to consciousness. This is so primarily because the political structure of a polydox community is integral to its very nature, so that without a proper politics, polydoxy, and the freedom it represents, cannot exist. Moreover, the form of religious political structure that has traditionally prevailed, particularly in Jewish communities, is improper and unacceptable to a polydoxy. Consequently, for its very existence, and owing to its historical novelty, polydoxy is committed to continuing exploration into forms of religious organization, with emphasis upon the new and the creative.

The function, and sole reason for existence, of a religious community's political structure is to serve the religious ideology that the community professes. The political structure of a religious community is not an end in itself, but the creation and instrument of the community's ideology. It is service to the community's ideology, therefore, that provides justification for the exercise of authority and power inherent in a religious political structure. In the history of religion no more tragic moments have occurred than those when a religious political structure has been diverted from service to the community's ideal and ideological purpose, and employed instead for the sake of power itself.

Religions traditionally have been orthodox, and religious political structures, consequently, have been fashioned historically to serve orthodox communities. The orthodox community understands itself to possess beliefs, such as on the nature of God, and practices, ritual and moral, that are absolutely true, valid, and authoritative. These beliefs and practices are obligatory upon every member of the community. Accordingly, the political structure of the orthodox religious community has one basic function, to bring every member to accept and follow the community's authoritative beliefs and practices. To accomplish this, the orthodox political structure employs its power, on the one hand, to indoctrinate the members of its community with its own views, and on the other hand, to keep information and freedom from them lest they choose other views. Consequently, the orthodox political

structure is organized so that the power to make religious decisions is given only to those who best know its authoritative truths and are committed faithfully to serve them. Historically, this has meant that authority has been given to an official class of religious leaders, which may be referred to as the clergy, or more usually, a small oligarchic hierarchy selected from among the clergy. Hence in an orthodoxy, beliefs, rituals, liturgy, services, morals, the education of the young, and all other significant aspects of religious life are determined by the clergy. There is no reason why in an orthodoxy authority should be given or decision-making shared with the non-official members of the community, the laity. The only truths and principles recognized by the orthodox community are in possession of the clergy, so that the laity, consequently, has nothing of substance to contribute to belief and practice, nor the right to choose otherwise. In sum, the orthodox political structure has no reason to be accountable or responsible to the personal religious choices or desires of the general membership over which it has authority, for the only master the structure serves are the orthodox truths, and the only personal needs it recognizes are for the orthodox faith.

In a polydox religion, the political structure serves an opposite function from that in an orthodoxy. There is no authoritative and obligatory body of belief and practice that its members must be brought to accept. The only principle required in a polydox is the mutual affirmation of one another's freedom. This freedom, or self-authority, entails the ultimate right of the polydox religionist to determine for himself the beliefs, rituals, liturgy, services, morals and religious education he will accept. The function of the political structure in the polydox community, consequently, is the reverse of that in orthodoxy. Rather than repress the personal religious freedom of the individual, its function is to assure and nourish its existence. To accomplish these ends, the political structure must serve in the following ways. Polydox religionists must be provided with all the information they require regarding alternatives of belief and practices to make knowledgeable personal decisions. They must then not only be assured the right to carry out these decisions, but access to institutional help to carry them out in the most effective manner possible. This requires that the institution make available to the individual the facilities and materials necessary for the personal option he selects. The primary task of the political structure of the polydox community is to serve the free choices of its members, rather than, as in an orthodoxy, bring its members to serve some absolute truth prescribed by the clergy. The function of the polydox clergy is to provide for their members the information, facilities, and material they require to exercise and fulfill their personal and collective free choices.

The analysis above of orthodox and polydox religious structures, although brief, helps to clarify a persistent and pervasive problem in the Reform Jewish community. Many polydox Jews are members of the Reform community; and judged by all reasoning, as well as by its behavior, Reform Judaism is

a polydoxy. Nevertheless the institutional political structure of the national Reform community is one proper to an orthodoxy rather than a polydoxy. Decisions for the entire Reform community are made by small groups from among the clergy and associated professionals. As in orthodoxy, these decisions serve a body of beliefs and practices that are taken as absolutely true and valid, and obligatory upon all Reform Jews. These beliefs and practices, which can be characterized as "traditionoid," are incorporated into prayerbooks, ritual, and religious school texts that are then presented as having some kind of "official" status in the Reform community. Not only is freedom of choice and a share in the decision-making denied the Reform laity, but the majority of the Reform clergy as well. There is no access to the Reform community's resources and funds for those who reject the traditionoid materials, and wish to pursue a new and creative course producing alternative approaches for the Reform constituency.

The theoretical problem of an orthodox political structure in Reform is that it is entirely without justification in fact or morality. Reform Judaism simply does not possess a body of belief and practice that is absolutely true and valid, and obligatory, therefore, upon all Reform Jews. No basis exists, therefore, for an orthodox political structure, or for this structure to present any belief or practices, prayerbook or ritual as "official" in Reform, or to allocate all the resources and funds of the Reform community to the production of traditionoid materials.

The problem of the orthodox political structure of Reform is more than theoretical. Significant numbers of Reform Jews, clergy and laity alike, have been disheartened by the closed traditionoid approach of the small oligarchies that control the production of liturgical and educational materials necessary for a vital Reform religious life. One need not look far to see examples of this. The new "official" Reform prayerbook, **Gates of Prayer**, as well as the **Passover Haggadah**, fail to meet the needs of many Reform Jews who enjoy a contemporary consciousness and reject the closed traditionoid bias of these works. Reform religious schools are increasingly in crisis, and certainly much of the blame is to be placed upon an indoctrinating traditionoid curriculum that is largely irrelevant to the religious needs of our time.

It is historically understandable that Reform Judaism, which emerged out of an orthodoxy, should retain vestiges of the past. Nevertheless, it is critically important for Reform survival to rid itself of such inheritances as national orthodox political structures, which contradict its true nature and are counterproductive in the modern world. Reform urgently requires a political structure that is accountable and responsible to the freedom of every member of the Reform community. It is to be hoped that a national dialogue on the Reform political structure will soon begin. The future calls, but it will not wait.

Alvin J. Reines