

Some degree of misunderstanding, in my opinion, exists in the minds of many persons regarding the dominant spirit of Jewish religious systems in our time. Views such as the existentialist, I-Thou philosophy of Martin Buber, and various sorts of neo-Orthodoxies capture the attention of those in other faiths who are interested in contemporary forms of Jewish religious expression. No doubt the colorful and panacean terms in which these views are couched contribute to the publicity; but their underlying message, which is congenial to many members of other religious traditions, must be said to contribute as well. This message, bluntly stated, is one of religion based on non-rational, non-empirical, and non-natural foundations. Yet it is clear that the most widespread principle of religious organization among Jews today owes its emergence and existence to rational commitment. The primary purpose of this discussion is to identify this principle, and analyze briefly its philosophic-theological foundations. This principle, particularly in the Reform Jewish movement, constitutes a primary element in the meaning of the term Judaism, but it is implicit as well in the religious practice of almost all Jews, other than those who are adherents of Orthodox Judaism. The name we will give this principle is polydoxy. To define polydoxy, let us begin with a brief review of the salient events leading to its emergence.

Entering into the nineteenth century, the term Judaism was understood by Jews generally to refer to a religious system that took the Jewish religious tradition as representing a single and homogeneous religious structure. The tradition emphasized consisted in the Bible, primarily the Pentateuch, and the Talmud, with little or no attention paid the rich philosophic heritage of the medievals. The religious structure that it was thought to express was that of Orthodox Judaism, or, as it was known in its early period, Pharisaism. This tradition, we may note, encompasses the writings of many different authors over a span of at least two thousand years by even a minimum reckoning, — from the Five Books of Moses to the poetry of the Song of Songs, from the moralism of Amos to the legalism of the Talmud. The explanation by Orthodoxy of how these many writings could express a single religious structure was simply that they were all, ultimately, the work of the one, enduring God, who, at various times in history, revealed His will in prophecy. Hence the Pentateuch and Talmud were directly revealed, and made up the primary items of belief; the other works were produced by a lesser mode of prophecy, inspiration. Orthodox Judaism, or Pharisaism, is what most persons continue to understand by the term Judaism; particularly is this true of Christians, whose concern is principally with the kind of Judaism existing

at the time of Jesus, and which is, as well, the Judaism most congenial to Christian beliefs.

Orthodox Judaism may be characterized in the following way: its principal belief is the factuality of the Sinaitic experience as recorded in Exodus. Moses and the Jews received a revelation at Sinai which climaxed a series of previous and lesser revelations to Abraham and various of his descendants. In this revelation, God's will, the commandments He wishes the Jews and mankind to observe, was made manifest. Here, and in other revelations to Moses, the Pentateuch and Talmud were revealed.

From these revelatory experiences are derived the following characteristic beliefs:

1) One God alone exists, who is omnipotent, eternal, omniscient and omnibenevolent.

2) God is the sole creator and conservator of the universe.

3) God in his omniscience is aware of man, and in his omnibenevolence exerts providence over human affairs.

4) The revelation of Pentateuch and Talmud to Moses is infallible. This revelation perfectly and forever expresses the will of God. No new revelation will occur or has occurred that alters this expression of God's will.

5) Inasmuch as this infallible revelation is the primary constituent of Orthodox Judaism, Orthodoxy is the only true religion.

6) The Creator is alone worthy of worship; and man, as creature, must obey his will.

7) God rewards those who observe

his commandments, and punishes those who do not.

8) There is an ideal end to history, the Messianic era, which will be ushered in by a Messiah. At this time men will be judged by God for their good deeds and their sins.

9) There is an after-life, consisting in the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul.

Before proceeding further with the theme of polydoxy, let us turn briefly to the term faith. As is well known, this term has enjoyed a lengthy history and a variety of meanings. We will use the term faith to refer to the act of assent that judges a belief or statement to be true. If the statement is made "God exists," the act of faith is the judgment that this statement is true. A belief may be judged true on the basis of evidence or no evidence. In some religions, the true and superior faith is that which is given without evidence, in fulfillment of the heart's needs, and with trust in the religious object. If we may agree that the rational or reasonable procedure is to have faith or give assent when evidence exists for a belief, to suspend assent when no evidence exists, and to dissent when the evidence is contrary; we may conclude that a religion which requires evidence for faith is committed to at least a minimal rationalism. To say that faith without evidence is unreasonable or non-rational is not to denigrate the religion of those who subscribe to faith without evidence. These persons are of the opinion that reason for true faith is inadequate, and insistence upon reasonableness a scandal.

The evidence supporting faith may be divided loosely into two kinds, objective and subjective. Objective evidence is that which is apprehended through man's natural faculties, sensation and reason. Moreover, it is apprehended publicly, by more than one person. Objective evidence may be unique or repeatable. Unique objective evidence is that which is witnessed by many observers, but which cannot be witnessed repeatedly at (human) will. Such evidence, for example, would be a perception of the Red Sea cleaving to allow the Israelites passage on dry land. Neither those who were present, nor anyone else, could produce a repetition of the evidence by human methods. Repeatable objective evidence is that which is experienced by many observers, and which can be reproduced at will. This is the evidence not only of science today, but of ancient and medieval metaphysical or theological science. Such proofs for the existence of God as Aristotle's and the medievals' cosmological argument, as well as the ontological and teleological arguments, may be experienced repeatedly. Any number of persons, by inducing the premises and deducing the consequences, can experience these proofs any number of times.

Subjective evidence is that which is apprehended externally through sensation, or internally, as in a prophetic vision or the communion of prayer. Moreover, it is apprehended privately, by one person alone. Moses' experience at the burning bush according to the Biblical narrative, is an instance of external, subjective evidence. We are told that Moses was alone when he saw

the bush burning unconsumed and heard the word of God. Abraham's prophetic experience, described in Gen. 15, is an instance of internal, subjective evidence. Abraham received his prophecy in a deep sleep which is necessarily without witnesses. The most common instance of internal, subjective evidence is probably the feeling of communion with a divine presence in prayer. In any case, the point of subjective evidence is that it is neither witnessed nor verified publicly. When accepted as evidence by anyone other than the person who apprehends it, subjective evidence must be accepted on the person's bare word or say-so.

We have then three possible conditions for faith in the truth of some belief: 1) faith when there is no evidence; 2) faith when there is subjective evidence; 3) faith when there is objective evidence. Different persons and different religions will profess faith for any one of these reasons. I think we may agree that the most compelling of these three kinds of evidence is the objective. Certainly, it is the most widely accepted of the three kinds of evidence. Not everyone agrees on the nature of objective evidence, but everyone other than the skeptic and the solipsist subscribes to some kind of objective evidence as valid. Subjective evidence is less widely regarded. The scientist as scientist rejects it, as does the logical empiricist in philosophy. Existentialists and psychoanalysts, on the other hand, ascribe to subjective evidence various degrees of validity. The average religionist probably bases all or the greater part of his religious belief on it. The primary

difficulty with such evidence is that there is no way to verify it for others except by say-so. This gives rise to two problems among many: why should any person believe another's say-so; and how is a choice made of one person's say-so over another's when the two conflict? Faith without evidence is open to these objections and more. For one, it leaves the religionist entirely without criteria by which to judge even his own belief. The requirement of subjective evidence does at least enable the individual to judge a belief on the basis of evidence, albeit private. Faith without evidence is wholly blind, given for no reason at all. How can a person, therefore, distinguish for himself between the various kinds of beliefs he might accept, enjoying, as he does, an equal lack of evidence for all of them? How can he even distinguish between the illusion of phantasy created by finite man out of need, and the reality of a true religion? Since, however, there is no way to to prove *conclusively* the superiority of one kind of evidence over another, the evidence or lack of evidence a person will require for his religious beliefs must ultimately be left to personal choice.

In Orthodox Judaism, as in all major Jewish religious systems until modern times, the condition of faith is objective evidence. No Jewish religious system originating prior to the nineteenth century has rested its claim to truth, ultimately, on grounds other than objective evidence. This is not to say that individuals have not undergone experiences that constitute subjective evidence, but that the claim to truth for the religious system itself was based upon objective

evidence, not these subjective occurrences. Truth was not claimed for beliefs because they satisfied the heart's desire, or to satisfy any other human need, but because objective evidence was present for them.

What is the objective evidence underlying the beliefs of Orthodox Judaism? First, there are miracles. A miracle provides objective evidence in that it is perceived naturally by the senses in the presence of more than one witness. Miracles prove the existence of a theistic God in much the same way that a laboratory experiment proves the existence of any unobservable. The only reasonable explanation for the phenomenon of a miracle is the existence of a being with intelligence who has power over the natural world. Second, there is the evidence of a prophecy that is fulfilled. Again, it is reasonable that only a being who controls and directs history can make the prediction of an event come true. Hence Deutero-Isaiah's proof for the existence of Yahveh is that the prophecies of the pre-exilic prophets foretelling the destruction of Israel had been fulfilled. Third, there is the direct empirical experience of witnessing God reveal himself, as he did before the Jewish people at the Sinaitic theophany. Thus miracles and fulfilled prophecies objectively establish the existence of God, while witnessing an event such as the Sinaitic revelation establishes the divine origin of the commandments as well.

Two reasons stand out for the stringent requirement of objective evidence as the condition of faith for religious belief. One is that a person must be

convinced a religion is true, or it cannot be his religion. The Prophets and Sages were as aware as present day psychoanalysts of dreams and illusions that are taken as prophetic visions. Subjective evidence, owing to its public unverifiability, is always suspect. The other is that a position of authority is granted the person who knows the true religion, so the Pope in Roman Catholicism, or the Sanhedrin in Pharasaism. The one who has possession of religious truth is in a position to lay down dogma or true opinion. This is the meaning of the word orthodox — true opinion. Inasmuch as a religionist gives rights over his free action to someone in authority, the claim to authority is clearly a most significant one. Consequently, we can appreciate why the Jew has demanded the most stringent kind of proof, objective evidence, to support any claim to religious truth. We may venture this as the reason, when Jesus came to the Jews with his teachings, that they demanded a sign, a miracle, to support his authority. The Jews were accustomed and committed to the requirement of objective evidence for any claim to authoritative religious truth.

At the start of the nineteenth century, we find the Orthodox system of Judaism holding sway, with Jews almost universally accepting its leaders' right to lay down "true opinion." Thus the Orthodox interpretation of Jewish tradition as a monolithic, homogeneous whole was regarded as authoritative, as were its basic beliefs, described above. Yet this authority was not absolute; it was dependent upon the validity of the

objective evidence, supernatural and natural, claimed for its truth. In the course of the nineteenth century, many influences, three of which will engage our attention briefly, gained sufficient strength to discredit this evidence for a great number of Jews. These three influences were (and are): decreased credibility of the miracle and revelation claims of religion; scientific or critical study of the Bible and Talmud; and the refutation of the Aristotelian and medieval proofs for the existence of God.

The decreased acceptance of miracle and revelation claims was (and is) most likely attributable to the success of the scientific method and the naturalistic metaphysical hypotheses that underlay its efforts. Science, by its success in fighting the maladies and ills of nature, in a way that miracles did not, earned the right to its influence. Moreover, men lived and had lived through great evils, yet no wonders appeared to aid them. The method of science demanded an approach to the object of study that was without presuppositions or theological commitments — an approach which allowed conclusions to be arrived at by empirical and rational means. This approach, in an increasingly demythologized general environment, was shortly taken in the study of the Bible and Talmud. It was soon established to the satisfaction of many Jews that the monolithic view of Jewish tradition was incorrect. Rather, the tradition was composed of points of view significantly distinct from one another: Jeremiah and Job accept nothing of the Pharisaic belief in a meaningful resurrection and after-life; Amos' God,

to whom all peoples were equal, would entirely destroy Israel for its sins, whereas the God of the Pharisees loved Israel specially, and regardless of sin, would perpetuate His people forever, into the Messianic era. Numerous such examples may be cited. In view of these differences among the parts of the tradition, it was evident that the tradition was not the product of a one, enduring, theistic God, who consistently revealed Himself in history, but of fallible humans who, whatever the source of their inspiration, were not of one mind on the nature of God or principal beliefs of religion. Moreover, the many errors and inconsistencies revealed to critical study strongly reinforced the concept of the human authorship of Scripture. Once human authorship was determined, it was a small step to deny that the miracles and supernatural revelations as literally described in Scripture had ever occurred. They were taken as the not unusual extravagances of the ancient historian, who mixed fact, phantasy, and myth in his creations. Hence the objective evidence of miracle and revelation upon which Pharisaic or Orthodox Judaism, and its authority were based was discredited. The term *discredited* is used advisedly; this evidence was not disproved, it simply was no longer believed.

The objective evidence drawn from philosophy was of lesser importance to Orthodox Judaism. The proofs for the existence of God did not demonstrate the kind of theism Orthodoxy asserted, and they certainly did not substantiate any of its distinctive doctrines. However, for the Orthodox religionist who

found the support of reason important, the conclusions these arguments produced were sufficiently close to his beliefs to give his faith in them some desired rationality. We cannot here enter into a detailed discussion of these proofs or their refutations; suffice it that the textbooks of philosophy are replete with the arguments of Hume and Kant which have conclusively refuted all effort to demonstrate the existence of God by rational means. Hume and Kant did their work in the eighteenth century, but their influence on Jewish thinkers was largely felt in the nineteenth century.

The upshot of the matter was that, by the end of the nineteenth century, an ever increasing number of Jews were satisfied that no objective evidence existed to verify or support the beliefs and authority of Orthodox Judaism. The question for these Jews now was what kind of religious structure would be consonant with the kind of evidence for religious belief that remained — subjective evidence. The answer given, perhaps more at the time by feeling than in awareness, was polydoxy. Polydoxy stands in direct opposition to orthodoxy. Whereas, in an orthodoxy, the religious institution is committed to the truth of a single religious belief on any theme of religion, or at the most, to a narrow variation on some single belief, in a polydoxy, with one exception, all opinions on the great themes of religion, as for example, the nature of God or the fact of immortality, are equally valid so far as the religious institution is concerned. The exception not permitted, that is, rationally disallowed, is that there is in existence the kind of evidence

that would substantiate an orthodoxy. For a polydox institution rests on the judgment that there is no objective evidence for faith in religious belief, and on the principle that where no such evidence obtains, the religious institution can be coherently committed to only one belief: the affirmation of its members' individual freedom. An orthodox religion is rationally possible where objective evidence exists to support the right of those who lay down the orthodoxy, the true opinion, and it is not so possible where subjective or say-so evidence alone exists. Unless objective evidence can be given for a religious belief, no special authority is granted anyone. No matter how convincing these private experiences are to him, the religionist's opinions are only personal ones. The rationalism of polydoxy lies here, in its judgment and evaluation of the evidence necessary for religious authority. It is intuitively understood as incoherent to endow someone with rights over oneself unless he can objectively establish those rights. No one is installed as the arbiter of religious truth on the basis of evidence that is in no wise publicly verifiable. In a polydox religious community, each is his own authority, for the appropriate relation among the members of the community is not that of hierarchy to laymen, but of equals in

dialogue. Aside from the theologic incoherence present in investing authority on the basis of subjective evidence, the tyranny that can ensue from a total lack of objective control appalls the imagination.

Polydoxy is the principle that underlies almost all existing Jewish religious systems: Reformism, Reconstructionism, and Conservatism. They are in *de facto* if not necessarily *de jure* agreement on its validity. The beliefs of Orthodox Judaism enumerated above, as well as those of the entire heterogeneous Jewish traditions, when not in conflict with polydox commitment, are accepted in varying degrees according to personal conviction. The dramatic subjective-existentialist and neo-Orthodox voices within the various Jewish religious communities, which appear to lay down as dogmas beliefs that are based on subjective evidence or no evidence at all, actually express the purely personal opinion of religionists enjoying the freedom that is theirs under a polydox religious structure. The ultimate commitment of the modern Jew, as was the commitment of the Jew of the past, is to rationalism; the rationalism that requires objective evidence for the faith of orthodoxy, the rationalism that turns to polydoxy when the faith of orthodoxy has gone.