III

Reform Judaism

Alvin J. Reines

To the reader who comes to a study of Reform Judaism with the usual notion that a religion is always dogmatic and certain, with clearly discernible outlines of belief and practice, the cautious discussion that follows concerning the essence of Reform Judaism will in all probability appear somewhat strange and perhaps even disconcerting. Yet caution and even hesitancy cannot be avoided, for there are special difficulties that confront the student of Reform Judaism, both the writer and reader. The proximate reason for these difficulties is that Reform, while heir to an ancient tradition, is itself a young religion, and no authoritative statement of its nature has yet been formulated. The ultimate reason for these difficulties is that Reform is a liberal religion, and a liberal state of affairs, whether political, economic, or religious, is always more difficult to define than one formulated along authoritarian lines. Hence, even should a writer abstract from a study of the Reform Jewish community a characterization of its essence that appears to him as theoretically satisfactory, the very fact that the liberal eschews an authoritarian resolution of his religious situation forbids the writer from presenting his point of view as final. It remains rather personal opinion, open to the continuing discussion and evaluation of his fellow members in the liberal religious situation.

We may note further that the Reform Jew comes to his undogmatic position fully aware of religious systems claiming to possess absolute truth and certainty. But he finds these claims unsubstantiated. The Reform Jew grants that authoritarian religions are simpler of definition, but he finds simplicity in this

regard no particular virtue. The purpose of religion is truth—truth about the universe, truth about man—and unless a religion be true, however well-defined its creed or practice, it will not serve its reason for existence. The Reform Jew has not found his truth in authoritarian religion. Despite these caveats, however, it must be emphasized that liberalism is not anarchy. Certain minimum lines of demarcation may be drawn. The religious liberal, utilizing the resources provided him by his community, finds in his liberal faith concrete and satisfactory solutions to the great problems of the religious life.

The most general mode of defining Reform Judaism is to utilize the standard of membership in Reform Jewish institutions. Thus, any person is to be considered a Reform Jew who is affiliated with one of Reform's three formal institutions: the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the Reform rabbinical association; the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the Reform congregational association; the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), the Reform rabbinical seminary. Any member of the CCAR, any member of a congregation affiliated with the UAHC, and any member of the HUC-JIR faculty or student body will be a Reform Jew.[1] (Also recognized as Reform Jews are those Reformers who lived in the eighteenth century prior to the establishment of these Reform institutions. See under "History.") This body of persons is referred to as the Reform Jewish community or simply the community.

Moreover, inasmuch as the constitutive factor in being a Reform Jew, according to the membership definition, is affiliation and not doctrine, religious thought and belief will be Reform Jewish so long as the one who professes it is a Reform Jew. Hence, a Reform Jewish system of thought or belief will be the religious thought or beliefs of any person who is a Reform Jew. And the phrase, Reform Judaism, as the generic

[1]The membership definition applies as well for the World Union for Progressive Judaism, which includes the several Reform congregations existing outside America, and with which the UAHC is affiliated.

term referring to the religious systems of all Reform Jews, will name the aggregate of religious systems subscribed to by Reform Jews. The term *aggregate* is used here advisedly. A cursory glance at the writings of Reform religious leaders reveals significant differences of opinion concerning God, revelation, and the other great religious themes; hence, the term "Reform Judaism" embraces different and even contrary religious systems. Thus, Reform Judaism refers to an assemblage or *aggregate* of systems rather than to some one system that is an integrated and unified whole.

The great value of the definition by membership for the preservation of the freedom of a liberal religion is apparent: it includes within its scope every member of the movement, and grants to the thought of every member a right that may be called the privilege of equal propriety. This privilege must be carefully understood. It does not mean that every system of Reform Jewish thought is equal in religious depth or intellectual value; it does mean that the religious thought of every Reform Jew is *ipso facto* a proper and rightful part of Reform Judaism. Hence, no member's thought can be censored as improper in Reform Judaism since, by definition, Reform Judaism is in part itself the member's thought.

The definition by membership is of great value in encouraging creativity and stimulating novelty with regard to the ritual and ideational structures of the Reform Jewish community. A new ritual or idea, whether invented by the individual Reform Jew, congregation, or adopted from the larger community of mankind, has immediate status as an element of Reform Judaism. Thus the tragic fates which overtook such thinkers as Giordano Bruno and Baruch Spinoza—one at the stake, the other by excommunication—are avoided, and the benefits of mankind's continuing discovery of his universe quickly enjoyed. This does not mean, of course, that the innovator necessarily will find other members of the Reform community agreeing with his new notions, but by the privilege of equal propriety, his membership in the community is not affected by

their disagreement and he may continue to argue for his conclusions from within the community itself.

Essence

We must now distinguish between the terms "Reform Judaism" and "essence of Reform Judaism." As we have noted, Reform Judaism refers to an aggregate of religious systems, and these systems may even be contraries with regard to many significant points. They do share some area in common, however, and to this area we give the name "essence of Reform Judaism." The essence of Reform Judaism may be considered a genus to which individual systems of Reform Judaism are related as species; the unity amidst a diversity. Care must be taken, therefore, in interpreting a sentence beginning: "Reform Judaism says. . . ." If the phrase refers to one of the systems of the aggregate of Reform Jewish systems, then the pronouncement that follows is of significantly less force and extent than if the essence of Reform Judaism is meant. The former refers to some one person or one group's point of view; the latter to a view shared by all Reform Jews. Failure to distinguish between these two meanings of the term "Reform Judaism" can lead to much confusion on the part of those who seek to understand it. In sum, Reform Judaism is what may be termed a religious pluralism, contrary ideas being expressed within it and only partial agreement in the total area of religious concern being required of its adherents.

Given the membership mode of definition, the one act necessarily performed by all Reform Jews is overt affiliation with the Reform Jewish community. In itself, membership is a religiously trivial act. However, as the act of affiliation with the Reform Jewish community, it is the external symbol of a highly significant internal decision. This decision concerns the nature of biblical knowledge, or revelation,[2] which in the final analysis is the basis of all religious belief and practice.

[2]This argument pertains equally to the Talmud, a document Orthodox Judaism maintains is revelation the equal of the Bible.

Considered generally, the Bible may be viewed according to three primary categories: first, verbal revelation; second, dynamic revelation; and third, natural revelation. The latter two categories will be referred to generally as nonverbal revelation. Viewed as verbal revelation, the Bible is conceived to be a communication from God to certain human minds, a communication of ideas contained in words in which God is the author equally of the words as well as the ideas, the letter as well as the spirit. This means that not only the ideas expressed by the words of Scripture are binding upon the religionist, but the literal meaning of these words (hence the name *verbal*) as well, since both are enjoined by God. Consequently, to take an example from the Day of Atonement, one would not be free to accept the idea or spirit of the day, which is, as its name indicates, atonement and reconciliation, yet reject the particular ceremonials and rituals commanded by the Bible to be observed through the day; for both internal and external observances are literally directed by God. A further implication of the concept of verbal revelation is that the Bible as the literal word of God must be considered entirely infallible and insusceptible of change or alteration except through some subsequent verbal revelation; for the inappropriateness of change by the human person in that which has been ordained by the omniscient divine will is evident.

Viewed as dynamic revelation, the Bible is conceived to be either the product of a divine influence operating upon man's natural faculties, such as reason and the imagination, or the report of men who, with human faculties, have witnessed some supernatural event. This means that part of the Bible is inspired by God or other superhuman agencies, while part is produced by man. Therefore, since only a part of the Bible is conceived to be the work of superhuman agencies, subsequent generations may on principle discard those parts they consider to be historically conditioned while retaining the timeless and universal. Consequently, one would be free to accept as divine the idea of the Day of Atonement yet reject as human and archaic the

rituals prescribed by the Bible for celebrating the day. It must be noted, however, that this view serves to make the Bible fallible in practice because determination of which part of the Bible has in truth proceeded from superhuman agencies is dependent upon the reason of men living in later times. Inasmuch as human reason is evidently fallible, the content that is chosen by man as divine is always open to the question of whether it actually be divine or may not, in fact, be human in origin. Thus, although dynamic revelation is partially infallible in theory, it is entirely fallible in application and practice.

Viewed as natural revelation, the Bible is conceived to be the response and creation of human minds in the search through history for value, purpose, and divinity in life and existence. This means that one may accept or reject the Bible's ideas and words at will, for revelation is here regarded as entirely the product of finite minds and, as such, altogether fallible, its notions subject to change and development by succeeding generations. This view differs from that of dynamic revelation in that it considers no part of revelation to be produced by superhuman agencies or inspired by supernatural events; therefore, on the theoretical level this view increases the element of fallibility present in revelation.

Returning to the point that affiliation with the Reform Jewish community is the external symbol of a highly significant internal decision, we note the following: The truth of a concept may be affirmed or denied explicitly in words. When the concept possesses behavioral implications, that is, when affirmation or denial of the concept implies that one should or should not perform some act, then it may be affirmed or denied implicitly by performance or lack of performance of the required action. The concept of verbal revelation clearly possesses behaviorial implications in that if one affirms the Bible to be verbal revelation, then one affirms the obligation upon himself to act in accordance with its ritual and ceremonial obligations; no abrogation or change of the Bible's structure of obligation may be considered rightfully possible. Every Reform Jewish system,

however, rightfully, in its opinion, abrogates or changes this structure of obligation (see under "History," *infra*). Therefore, every Reform Jewish system denies the notion of verbal revelation. Inasmuch as the act of affiliation with the Reform Jewish community is clearly assent to its universal procedure, this act of affiliation constitutes an implicit denial of the concept of verbal revelation and, consequently, the affirmation of the concepts either of dynamic or natural revelation. Hence, affiliation with or membership in the Reform Jewish community is religiously significant, pointing to the concept of revelation to which the religionist subscribes. Since this act is necessarily participated in by every member of the Reform Jewish community, it meets our standard that the essence of Reform Judaism is a universal act of the community; we have, therefore, the first element constituting the essence of Reform Judaism: the affirmation that the Bible is dynamic or natural revelation and that there is in existence no revelation other than dynamic or natural revelation.

We turn now to the second element in the essence of Reform Judaism, the principle of radical freedom, which is a corollary of the first element. The denial of verbal revelation constitutes an implicit denial of absolute ecclesiastical authority. For though we take it as evident that the Creator, God, would have absolute authority over man, and that his *indubitably* assigned agents would as well, we take it as equally evident that an ordinary human without divine election has no such authority. There can be an indubitable assignment of authority from God to man only in an infallible revelation, that is, verbal revelation, since fallible revelation, either dynamic or natural, is open to error and hence not sure. A religionist who affirms the existence of dynamic or natural revelation can always maintain that the scriptural passage, or whatever other basis of the claim to absolute authority there may be, is human in origin or interpretation, therefore fallible and in no way binding. Thus, the Reform Jew in denying verbal revelation denies that any human possesses an irrefragable claim to authority over his fellow men.

Each person is sovereign, possessed of absolute self-authority—this is what is meant by the principle of radical freedom. Here "radical" (Latin: *radix,* root) means ultimate; the ultimate justification of authority over man is a verbal revelation from the principle of Being; lacking this mode of revelation, man is free in an absolute or ultimate sense. (We are not speaking here of entities possessing conditional authority such as the family or the state.)

The reason why there exists in Reform the possibility (as well as the fact) of Reform Jewish systems containing mutually exclusive elements of thought and belief is now clear. Since no person or group of persons possesses absolute authority and the consequent right of dogmatization, Reform Jews, on principle, will subscribe to different views as their conscience, belief, and reason dictate. However, the elements we have described as the essence of Reform Judaism are necessarily subscribed to by all. Reform Judaism is a liberal religion, a diversity of opinions and persons in communication with one another, and the unity of the community in which this dialogue takes place is established by the affirmation of each person's integrity in the principle of radical freedom. In sum, the Reform Jewish community is an association of persons who affirm the radical freedom of one another and who pursue a dialogue on the ultimate nature of existence.

History

Prior to epitomizing the history of Reform Judaism, some clarification of the terms to be employed in this discussion will be helpful. These terms are: discrete religious continuum, religious matrix, and religious emergent. A discrete religious continuum refers to an aggregate of religious systems which are recognizably or accidentally similar, and often referred to by one name, but which are nonetheless essentially distinct religious forms. Judaism, taken to mean the religious belief, thought, and practice of the Jews from Abraham through Moses, the prophets, Sadducees, Pharisees, and so forth, is

such a discrete religious continuum, and will henceforth be referred to as the Jewish continuum.

A matrix religion is a religious form within a continuum which immediately precedes a new religious form, bequeathing to it various extraessential elements, either ideational or symbolic. A religious emergent is the new religious form. The various religious forms that constitute the continuum will be designated member systems of the continuum; Orthodox Judaism is the matrix religion of Reform Judaism; Reform Judaism is an emergent religious form with respect to Orthodox Judaism; both are member systems of the Jewish continuum.

Reform arose only gradually from its matrix religion, Orthodox Judaism. The milieu in which this rise occurred was Europe, enjoying the political, cultural, economic, and religious emancipation of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The fundamental issue between Orthodoxy and Reform was to be the nature of the revelatory documents of the Jewish continuum (the Bible and the Talmud): Orthodoxy maintaining these documents were verbal revelation and no change was permissible in the structure of obligation (belief and ritual) they imposed; Reform maintaining they were nonverbal revelation and change was permissible as conscience and reason dictated.

In the inchoate or initial phase of the emergence of Reform Judaism, the issue was not clearly defined. The early reformers were more concerned with changes in the ritual structure than with innovations in theology. In instituting changes, therefore, they did not do so on the basis that the Bible and Talmud were nonverbal revelation and ritual changes consequently could be made on principle, but that the changes either restored original biblical and Talmudic practice, or were a logical extension of such practice.

Among the principal events of the inchoate period was the dedication of the so-called first Reform temple in Seesen, Westphalia, in 1810. The leader of this temple, Israel Jacobson, introduced the following changes in the Orthodox practice: preaching in the German vernacular rather than Hebrew or

Yiddish; reciting hymns and prayers in the vernacular rather than Hebrew; and accompanying the service by a musical instrument, the organ. In 1818, another Reform temple, the Hamburg Temple in Hamburg, Germany, was dedicated. The changes introduced here followed closely those of the Seesen temple: use of the vernacular for some prayers, use of the organ; however, with some minor changes in the liturgy regarding the Messiah adumbrating the momentous theological changes still to come. This pattern of innovation spread to congregations throughout Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century; Austria, France, Hungary, England, and Denmark all witnessed the appearance of congregations employing ritual reforms; and by this time a Reform movement had begun in America as well.

By the midcentury mark, the sporadic tendencies in Europe toward Reform received an organizational impetus in the call of Abraham Geiger, a prominent rabbi of Breslau, Germany, for a conference of rabbis to consider the questions and problems raised by the emergence of the new movement: how much change; what were the principles behind the change; what organization was possible? This call initiated what may be termed the discussion or middle phase of the emergence of Reform Judaism and led to the Brunswick (Germany) Conference in 1844, the first of several which helped bring some measure of clarification to the developing situation. These conferences increased further the degree of change in the ritual and legal structure; liturgical practice, domestic law, ceremonial and holiday observance, all were affected.

A significant event took place at the second of these conferences, the Frankfort-on-the-Main Conference held in the German city in 1845, where it became clear that not all the reformers were of one mind. A member named Zacharias Frankel, who was in favor of only very modest changes in the Orthodox structure, withdrew to form what was to become the movement called Conservative Judaism.

The last of the major conferences was held in Breslau (Germany) in 1846. Deep and strenuous opposition to these conferences and their conclusions was put forth by the Orthodox and Conservative groups, but the movement to reform could not be halted, and the intolerance of the opposition served only to heighten the significance of the principle of radical freedom which was at the heart of the movement, although still only an implicit principle rather than an explicit one. Significantly new theological notions had been hinted at but not explicitly expressed, although members of the conferences were offering such notions individually. These conferences did not result in the establishment of an organized body of leadership for the Reform movement, but they provided the opportunity for an exploration of the problems and possibilities of the Reform situation; the procedure of conferences they initiated contributed materially to the methods which resulted in the final phase of the Reform movement to occur in America.

Reform had been initiated in America in 1824 when forty-seven members of the Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina, petitioned for the use of vernacular in prayers and sermons and for the elimination of portions of the liturgy. Upon the rejection of this petition, a group of the petitioners resigned from the congregation and formed the Reformed Society of Israelites, which, in addition to modifying the Orthodox service, dropped from its creed the notion of bodily resurrection and belief in the advent of a Messiah who would restore the Jewish state and the ancient sacrificial system. The Society was short-lived, but the age of reform had come to the American Jewish community.

In 1841 the aforementioned Congregation Beth Elohim dedicated a new temple in which an organ was placed, and where the Orthodox practice of observing holidays for two days was discontinued for a one-day observance. In 1842 the Bar Sinai congregation of Baltimore was founded by reformers, and in 1845 Temple Emanuel of New York City, another Reform congregation, was organized. Soon Reform congregations were spreading throughout the country, leading to the final phase—the organization of Reform institutional life and the clear af-

firmation of the nonverbal character of the revelatory documents of the Jewish continuum.

The organizational architect of this final phase was Isaac Mayer Wise. Emigrating to America from his native Bohemia in 1846, in which year he was elected rabbi of Congregation Beth-El in Albany, New York, Wise began agitating in 1848 for union in Reform Jewish life. In 1873 Wise's efforts came to fruition and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations was established with thirty-four member congregations. Over six hundred congregations are members of the UAHC today. Among the primary goals of the UAHC was servicing the educational and organizational needs of individual congregations, the organization of new congregations, and the establishment and maintenance of higher education in Jewish knowledge. This last goal was achieved in 1875 when, under Wise's guidance, the Hebrew Union College was founded by the UAHC in Cincinnati, Ohio. The college, which is the Reform rabbinical seminary, was the second major institution of Reform Judaism. In 1950 the Hebrew Union College merged with the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City, a rabbinical seminary which had been founded by Stephen S. Wise in 1922, to become the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and now has schools in Los Angeles, California, and Jerusalem, Israel, as well. In 1889, the third and last of the major institutions of the Reform Jewish community, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform rabbinical association, was organized, also under the leadership of Isaac Mayer Wise. The CCAR immediately recognized all modern rabbinical conferences from the Breslau Conference in 1844 as predecessors whose work it continued, and thus it established the formal continuity in the development of Reform Judaism.

One of the rabbinical conferences the CCAR thus recognized was the Pittsburgh Conference held in the Pennsylvania city in 1885, at which the first explicit Reform Jewish system laid down by the Reform rabbis acting as a group was promulgated. Before discussing in summary fashion the theological principles

put forth by this conference, let us recall the characterization of a Reform Jewish system laid down earlier so that we may note how this is exemplified by the Pittsburgh Platform. A Reform Jewish system is the religious system of any person or group of persons belonging to the Reform Jewish community. It entails necessarily the essence of Reform Judaism and usually covers, in addition, all the elements germane to the religious life: God, providence, ethics, liturgy, and so forth. Thus it is broader in scope than the essence of Reform Judaism, which concerns only the question of revelation and consists in the affirmation of nonverbal revelation and its corollary, the principle of radical freedom. However, the essence of Reform Judaism is broader in application than any single Reform Jewish system, inasmuch as every Reform Jew subscribes necessarily to the former but not to the extraessential elements of the latter. An additional point to be kept in mind is that every Reform Jewish system, in recognizing nonverbal and fallible revelation as its basis, builds into itself the grounds of its own possible eventual rejection, while allowing for disagreement with its extraessential elements even as they are proposed. These conditions were all met by the theological principles formulated at the Pittsburgh conference.

The affirmation of the Bible as susceptible to change and therefore nonverbal revelation appears on several occasions. One such statement (the third principle) reads: "We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization." Again from the second principle: "We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of Divine Providence and Justice dealing with man in miraculous narratives." (In addi-

tion, the authority of the Talmud was explicitly rejected at the CCAR meeting held in Rochester, New York, in 1895, although its value as "religious literature" was affirmed.)

Recognition by the platform that it was itself a fallible system subject to disagreement and rejection is expressed in the notion of progressive revelation (from the sixth principle): "We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with reason." The evolutionary and advancing nature of rational and scientific knowledge is anticipated as producing profound new influences on the systems of Reform Judaism, the Pittsburgh formulation as well.

As for the elements in the religious system other than the essence of Judaism, the following points were made. The highest conception of the "God idea" is the one taught in the Bible "and developed and spiritualized by the Jewish teachers, in accordance with the moral and philosophic progress of their respective ages." The concept of God pointed to here is ethical monotheism, in which God is conceived to be a perfectly unified person, self-conscious and transcendent, yet exerting his will in history. The mission of the Jew is conceived as making manifest to humanity the goal toward which God's will tends. This goal is the "realization of Israel's great messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men." The platform does not see the fulfilment of this hope in a narrow nationalism but "extends the hand of fellowship to all who operate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men." Concerning the afterlife, the immortality of the soul is affirmed, but the beliefs in "bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (Hell and Paradise)" are rejected. On the subject of ethics, the platform states: "In full accordance with the spirit of Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relation between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society."

The CCAR subsequently published a prayerbook (1892), the *Union Prayerbook,* in which these principles were embodied in the liturgy. Revised twice since its initial publication, the *Union Prayerbook* has been adopted by almost all the member-congregations of the UAHC.

The Pittsburgh Platform, through the intellectual and moral appeal of its beliefs, as well as the widespread use of the *Union Prayerbook,* achieved the status of a classical Reform Jewish system. However, there were those in its own day who disagreed with elements of its thought, and in time these disagreements increased. Suffice to say, many great events since 1885—two world wars, the Nazi Germany holocaust of the thirties, the rise of Zionism, culminating in the state of Israel, as well as advances in the physical and psychological sciences, coupled with new philosophic emphases—have all left their impress on Reform Jews. Hence, new Reform systems and others formerly in obscurity have come to prominence, and the Pittsburgh Platform now shares its influence with other modes of thought.

A detailed investigation of these emergent systems, with their different views of God, man, and the universe, must be left for a work of larger compass. Yet the point must be emphasized that, for all their differences, the essence of Reform Judaism entailed by these systems remains the same—an abiding source of unity amidst the diversity of persons and ideas that constitute the Reform Jewish community, and a safeguard to its people that they will have the freedom necessary to realize the dignity and full growth of the human person.

If any teaching of Reform Judaism would appear to be unequivocally significant for the world today, this is undoubtedly the message of individual human freedom implicit in the essence of Reform Judaism. In a world of increasing centralization, the affirmation of the principles of radical freedom is a mission with which the Reform Jew is charged by the essence of his belief, and never in world history has the need for this message been joined with greater urgency and opportunity for its realization.

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