

REVIEW ARTICLE:

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Some of the basic theological issues that were discussed in the *Commentary* symposium on "The State of Jewish Belief" are evaluated here by Rabbi Spero whose most recent contribution was an essay on "Is There an Indigenous Jewish Theology" in our Spring-Summer 1967 issue.

THE CONDITION OF JEWISH BELIEF

According to the Talmud (*Megillah* 9), King Ptolemy of Egypt placed seventy-two Jewish elders in seventy-two cubicles and ordered them to translate the Pentateuch into Greek. A spirit of wisdom entered the hearts of all seventy-two and they rendered the Pentateuch into identical language which was at once faithful to the original and yet contained apologetic emendations to prevent misunderstanding by the pagan world.

When the editors of *Commentary*, "the leading journal of Jewish intellectual thought" (according to the blurb on the book jacket — a more accurate description would perhaps be — "the leading Jewish journal of intellectual thought"), last year sent questionnaires containing five basic questions on matters of Jewish belief to fifty-five Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Rabbis, it would also seem that a providential spirit of wisdom entered the hearts of the eleven Orthodox thinkers who independently submitted replies to the questions.*

For only the Orthodox replies exhibited a certain striking and crucial uniformity and this, in the opinion of the reviewer, constitutes a *Kiddush Hashem* of no small magnitude.

The five questions were directed to the respondents as individuals and responses were solicited in terms of their personal beliefs rather than the official teachings of their respective denominations (if such there indeed be!). Of course these two may be identical but they need not be. The replies are thus to be regarded primarily as personal testaments rather than "alternative structures employed for apologetic theology" or as attempts to convince the readers of *Commentary*. For the questions ask essentially for statements describing one's beliefs, not for justification of one's beliefs. Moreover, if one did construe the intent of the Symposium as apologetic, it would appear rather foolhardy for all these intelligent people to have hoped to persuade in such brief presentations!

The Condition of Jewish Belief, A Symposium conducted by the Editors of *Commentary Magazine* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1966).

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It is odd that Eugene Borowitz (one of the respondents) in a review of the Symposium (*Judaism*, Fall 1966) should see the replies as attempts at apologetic theology. It is no wonder then that he is disappointed when he observes that since the publication of the Symposium, "nothing seems to have changed at all." In truth the sheer mass of the material with so much of it necessarily repetitious tends to repel the casual reader.

The first question in its entirety was: "In what sense do you believe the Torah to be divine revelation? Are all the 613 Commandments equally binding on the believing Jew? If not, how is he to decide which to observe? What status would you accord to ritual commandments lacking in ethical or doctrinal content (e.g., the prohibition against clothing made of linen and wool)?"

Of the thirty-eight responses received, fifteen were from Reform Rabbis, twelve from Conservative and eleven from Orthodox. The most significant observation, one that becomes immediately apparent, and is marked by Milton Himmel-farb in his introduction to the Symposium as well as by Borowitz, is that "the true division is between Orthodox and non-Orthodox." The Reform and Conservative replies are indistinguishable on any basis of content. One finds some Reform Rabbis affirming the reality of the Covenant and the need to discover the Divine imperative behind the Mitzvot while some Conservative men are all wrapped up in the rationalistic idealism of classic Reform. Much of this tends to bear

out a view held by many that non-Orthodox Jewish denominational lines are growing increasingly irrelevant as a clue to a rabbi's theological views even as they have long ago become irrelevant as clues to a layman's level of observance. It is well known, for example, that Reconstructionism, comfortably ensconced within the Conservative movement, despite its encouragement of observance is theologically as destructive of Torah Judaism as classical Reform. As early as 1945, in the Zeitlin study, it was already reported that the views of 81% of the Conservative rabbis and 80% of the Reform rabbis who responded indicated a naturalistic rather than a super-naturalistic bias. What emerges from the present Symposium, however, is an indication that the pendulum swings both ways: that Reform rabbis are as susceptible to the new winds of religious existentialism as are their Conservative colleagues, if not more so. Of the twenty seven non-Orthodox responses about fourteen (eight Reform and six Conservative) present Judaism in uniquely religious terms. They speak of a living God who addresses man; of an actual Divine-Human encounter which constitutes Revelation at least in the sense of a self-disclosure of God's presence; of the need and possibility of the modern Jew to reappropriate portions of Tradition as Mitzvah — commanded by God. If a line is to be drawn at all among the non-Orthodox, it is to be drawn as Borowitz suggests, in terms of age only. Most of the men fifty years of age and older seem to have become set in

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their rationalistic bias too early to be moved by the good news of post-rational religious thought. The younger men have for the most part reinstated the traditional categories. Himmelfarb is wrong in seeing here the dominant influence of Rosenzweig as against that of Buber. The truth is that the influence of Buber and of Christian existential theologians generally has been no less formative. Admittedly, though, the role of Buber has not been in terms of providing a finished theological position but in creating through his Biblical studies and his work on Hasidism, the intellectual climate wherein God, the Covenant, Faith, Mitzvah and Chosenness could again be taken seriously.

As one reads the replies of our Orthodox colleagues: Eliezer Berkovits, Marvin Fox, Norman Frimer, Yaakov Jacobs, Immanuel Jakobovits, Norman Lamm, Aharon Lichenstein, Emmanuel Rackman, Zalman Schachter, M. I. Tendler, and Walter Wurzburger, one notices with deep pride and satisfaction that here at least there is historic continuity and theological consistency. While the expressions may be different, the conviction and the commitment are the same; the Torah in our possession as interpreted by the halakhic Tradition represents the will of God as revealed by Him to Moses. All affirm the fundamental principle of *Torah min Hashamayim*. Moreover, these presentations are no mere mechanical repetition of a catechism. One notices the scars and traces of the inner anguish, the mental struggle, the weighing and measuring, the re-

finement and analysis which led in each case to these affirmations.

In a few instances, the non-Orthodox men describe the crude, traditional concept of Revelation which they feel they must reject. But it would appear that most of the Orthodox men in the Symposium also reject such "Traditional" concepts! The "solution" that our Orthodox thinkers have evolved which to their mind enables them to escape the charges of fundamentalism and literalism, is to affirm the *fact* of Revelation — that God communicated with Moses but in a manner whose exact nature we know not. The result of this communication is our Torah, which constitutes, therefore, for every Jew "what the Lord requires of you."

There is a suggestive point made by Rackman, "As creation is a fact for me though I cannot describe the how, so is Revelation a fact, though its precise manner eludes me." What is important is that God stands in relation to the universe as Creator. Existence, therefore, has meaning and the universe has a Master so that before consuming from it I must make a blessing. So, too, God stands in relation to the Torah as a Lawgiver, making the observances described therein obligatory on me as a Jew. As one need not commit oneself in faith to a specific process of creation (how the Word became world) so one need not commit oneself to a specific form of the mechanics of Revelation to Moses (how the Word became Torah).

The key concept is undoubtedly that of Revelation and our Symposium participants can be classi-

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fied according to their understanding of this principle. (1) Our Reconstructionists and Old Line liberals believe no real revelation to have taken place. What is of value in the Bible is the result of human discovery and such inspiration and insight as a beneficent creator has endowed to human reason and intuition. (2) Our existential non-Orthodox brethren believe that actual events of Divine revelation took place and that the Torah is a human reflection of such events. (3) Our Orthodox colleagues believe in an encounter with God that revealed content and that the written and oral Torah are His will for us.

But as Wurzburger points out in his reply, a contentless revelation provides no basis for the binding character of the Mitzvot and "cannot possibly do justice to the pre-eminent position of Torah in Judaism." It is ironical that Solomon Schechter saw this long ago and wrote: "Political economy, hygiene, statistics are very fine things. But no sane man would do for them, make those sacrifices which Judaism requires of us. It is only for God's sake, to fulfil His commands and to accomplish His purpose, that religion becomes worth living and dying for. And this can only be possible with a religion which possesses dogmas" (*Studies in Judaism, First series*, p. 181. J.P.S. Phila. 1945).

(NOTE: I cannot resist, in this connection, commenting upon a real "howler"; a piece of unmitigated absurdity which at one swoop deprives all Jewish generations of intellectual integrity or if we wish

to be charitable, commits the fallacy of confusing causes and reasons.

"While it is true that Jews believe that the Torah was revealed at Sinai, I doubt whether any generation of Jews performed mitzvot because of this belief. . . . Jews observed Mitzvot because for them Halachah was a way of life . . ." Ezra Spicehandler (Reform), p. 229.

Several of the non-Orthodox rabbis candidly admit the gap between their concept of Revelation and *Mitzvah* but choose to live with the dilemma. Says Herbert Weiner (Reform), "Judaism without Law . . . is inauthentic and incapable of survival. A Judaism which insists on observance of all the Laws is unthinkable. . . . How do we choose what to observe and what to neglect? . . . I don't know" (p. 257). Says Seymour Siegal (Conservative), "Both the Divine and the human are bound up inexorably in the Torah and cannot be separated or distinguished by means of some formula" (p. 224).

Says Arthur Hertzberg (Conservative), "We are asked to explain by what principle one can affirm revelation and yet deny some of the commandments and much of the outlook of the sacred texts in which that revelation is presumed to be recorded. The plain truth is that there is no clear dogmatic answer, and all the attempts that have been made in the last two centuries to provide one are more dangerous than leaving the question open" (p. 93).

At this point one is tempted to ask of these men: "If you have

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gone so far, why not go a bit further? If you can bring yourself to believe in a God who reveals His Presence to His people, why not a God who reveals His Will? If God is concerned enough about man to provide him with the joys of existence, would He withhold from him the *meaning* of existence? If you can affirm in faith that God wants us to be moral — i.e. to respect our parents and not steal, why is it so hard to believe that He wants us to be holy and discipline our sexual behavior and our dietary habits? If you can live with open questions, why not the open question of how God revealed His Will to Moses?"

Until such time as the leap of the non-Orthodox can be lengthened we can only join with Borowitz in hoping that a "renewed sense of the reality of the Covenant will maximize concern and increase practise" (p. 38).

I consider the Orthodox unanimity on the question of Revelation to be a *Kiddush Hashem* in two respects. It is first a demonstration to our critics on the left that Torah Judaism in the understanding of its more reflective and sophisticated adherents requires espousal of certain basic doctrines and that full commitment to them does not seem to have been rendered "unthinkable" by involvement in the modern temper.

It is at the same time a demonstration to our critics on the right who concluded long ago that anyone with a broad philosophic approach, Jewish ecumenical leanings and secular interests must of necessity have developed "soft spots" in his beliefs and traces of heresy in

his doctrine. It is good to be able to report that the condition of Jewish belief among our more articulate Orthodox thinkers seems healthy enough.

I am disappointed and puzzled by Borowitz's failure to be impressed by the uniform stand of the Orthodox on the question of Revelation. He says, "Though the Orthodox insist on the Divine authorization of the Traditional principles and institutions for interpreting Jewish law, this distinct stand does not dominate their statements concerning God, Chosenness, Christianity or politics . . ." In the light of the "striking" failure of the non-Orthodox to insist on almost anything, the fact of a common Orthodox view would appear to merit some analysis as to reason and significance rather than a mere passing parenthetical note. The latter portion of Borowitz's statement is in part gratuitous and in part false. The distinct stand of the Orthodox on Revelation does not dominate their statements concerning Christianity or politics because there is no reason in the world why it should. The claim that their stand on Revelation does not dominate their views on God and chosenness is simply not true. What could be more distinctive about one's concept of God than that this God chooses to communicate actual commands to His people! True, the Orthodox men are one with their non-Orthodox colleagues in rejecting any suggestion of racial or national superiority in their concept of chosenness. The important difference, however, is that none of the Orthodox could deny that, ir-

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respective of whether Israel continues to choose God, His Covenant with Israel continues in full force; in Aharon Lichtenstein's words, the imperative is for "active submission to a divinely ordained discipline."

One of the unresolved problems raised by several of the replies is the question of the place and significance of doubt in Jewish theology. The prevailing view of inductive knowledge is that it can never give us the assurance of certitude but only probabilistic belief. Since we assume the propositions of Judaism to have cognitive content or empirical import, we are confronted by the question of the grounds of our belief in the truth of these propositions. Assuming we have the best reasons in the world, they still cannot provide absolute certainty for they are based on non-demonstrative inference. We cannot rule out the possibility that we may be wrong. How then can this situation be reconciled with Judaism's demand for "perfect faith" and total commitment? "Must the birthright of faith be sold for a mess of qualifications?" Wurzburger shows his awareness of the problem when he calls religious faith both "existential and propositional" and Rackman is almost shocking when he claims that "Judaism encourages doubts" and that a "Jew dare not live with absolute certainty." If Rabbi Rackman is referring to doubt about the truth of the principles we are obliged to affirm, then his point seems to me highly questionable. Admittedly, those who reflect on their faith develop doubt unless their faith is underguided by

personal religious experience. But I do not see where Judaism encourages doubt.

Be that as it may, a major problem for Jewish theology is to work out the relationship between the existential and the propositional elements in religious faith. The question may be formulated thus: Can one trust and have faith in God and Torah with a perfect and total commitment (*emunah she'laimah*) even though his faith that God exists and Torah is divine is infected with doubt?

Evident in some of the replies was a hesitancy to cooperate in a venture which required one to bare one's theological soul at the behest of a journal whose prevailing editorial policy keeps it far away from Jewish concerns. Comparing the questions and their conditions to the one posed by Hillel's *Ger*, Jacob Petuchowski bitingly observes, "No Jewish Jew would expect answers to five serious questions — questions which go to the very root of Jewish being — in 2,500 words." He is quite right. Were *Commentary* truly concerned about these questions, it would invite full-length articles on a sustained basis rather than conduct a poll. Its present attitude is only "intellectual curiosity" and one must indeed be of the disciples of Hillel to accept the conditions and venture a reply.

In spite of these complaints, the Symposium and its publication in book form is to be hailed as an important addition to the primary source material of the intellectual history of our day. Its pages offer rich rewards to those who seek deeper insight into the highways

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and byways of Jewish faith in our
time.