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"IS THERE AN INDIGENOUS JEWISH THEOLOGY?"

I wish to defend the claim that there is an indigenous Jewish theology. Of the several words which comprise this assertion the one which is most misleading is the two-letter word "is" in the sentence, "There *is* an indigenous Jewish theology." For while the words "indigenous" and "Jewish" and "theology" might be vague, the word "is" is systematically ambiguous. No single word has given rise to more confusion and discussion in contemporary philosophy than this simple copula. There are, to name a few, the "is" of predication and the "is" of identity, and the "is" of existence, of which our own sentence is an instance. Bertrand Russell once said that "it is a disgrace to the human race that it has chosen to employ the same word 'is' for so many entirely different ideas."[1]

In what *sense,* then, am I asserting that there is an indigenous Jewish theology? Consider the question: "Is there a prime number greater than one hundred?" Clearly the answer to this question is not to be found by empirical investigation based on observation but by logical analysis based on the rules for the introduction of new expressions in the system of natural numbers.

Analogously, when I claim that there *is* an indigenous Jewish theology, I do not mean that it necessarily exists as an explicitly-formulated system of propositions, suitably labeled, to be discovered in a book of some sort. What I *am* asserting is that, given a commitment to the beliefs and practices of Judaism and an acceptance of the Bible and the Talmud, there follows by logical entailment a commitment to certain theological propositions. The individual adherent of Judaism may

never have reflected upon the theoretical pre-suppositions of his faith or, if he had, may never have taken the trouble to articulate these propositions in an explicit manner. But that is of no consequence for this question. Jewish theology is there. It is implicit. It is logically entailed by the beliefs and practices of Judaism, by the assertions of the Chumash and the expressions of the Midrash. It is there, waiting to be unpacked, to be drawn out, to be formulated in a systematic way. And, as I will indicate later, for many areas of Judaism this has already been done. If an individual Jew, confronted by the articulated implications of his commitment, chooses to ignore them, refuses to recognize them, or rejects them, he does so at the cost of forfeiting his claim to coherence, consistency and rationality. While the Ravad may have been right in his acerbic stricture against Maimonides, that many greater and better people than he had the same thought, he was right only in the sense that perhaps we cannot say of those who believe the one God to have corporeal attributes, that they are to be considered heretics or unworthy of a share in the world to come. On the other hand, Maimonides was undoubtedly correct that logically the unity of God *implies* His incorporeality and that to affirm one and deny the other is a self-contradiction. These others referred to by the Ravad may have been greater and better than Maimonides, but they were certainly less logical.[2]

What is theology? I use the word interchangeably with the phrase religious philosophy. There is perhaps one distinction between the two, which is not really relevant for our purposes, and that is that the theologian is one who operates from *within* the faith, from a posture of commitment, while the philosopher of religion may be a professional thinker who is examining religion from the outside, with no personal attachment. However be it, theology or religious philosophy, one is *engaged* in it as soon as one becomes reflective about one's religious faith. One is *doing* theology as soon as one becomes reflective about one's religious beliefs and puts into words either for one's own benefit or in order to communicate to others what *it is* that one believes in or *why* one is engaged in certain religious practices.

When Rav said: The *mitzvot* were given only for the purpose

of refining mankind, he was laying the groundwork for a philosophy of the *mitzvot.*[3]

When Rabbi Akiva said, "Everything is foreseen [by God] but free will is given [to man]," he was pointing up a profound paradox resulting from two opposed religious principles.[4]

When the schools of Hillel and Shamai for two and a half years debated the question of whether a man would have been better off if he had not been created, they were debating a theological issue with great existential candor.[6]

But even the Bible itself is a mine of Jewish theology. The simple answer to Rashi's opening question of why the Torah did not begin with the words "this month is to you . . ." is obviously and precisely, as pointed out by Nachmanides, that the Torah is *not* merely a halakhic code but is concerned to impart a theology, an anthropology, a philosophy of history and *that* is indeed the material to be found in these early portions.

In fact, the case for Jewish theology seems to me to be *so* strong and *so* indubitable that perhaps we should ask — why it became a question in the first place? Why should anyone have thought that Judaism does *not* have a theology?

A number of pertinent considerations come to mind:

1) We erroneously learned to equate philosophy and theology with the style of Greek thought which was systematic, speculative, and formal. Because our people "did" their theology in a different key and with a different style we sometimes failed to recognize it as such. Jewish theology was enunciated spasmodically, more by impulse and never, in our primary sources, worked into a formal system.

2) Judaism's emphasis upon deeds, the Halakhah, and external behavior weakened concern with theology. As Schechter put it so aptly: "With God as a reality, revelation as a fact, the Torah as a rule of life and the hope of redemption as a most vivid expectation, they felt no need for formulating their dogmas into a creed — which is repeated — not because we *believe* but that we *may* believe."[6] In short, Judaism apparently believed that it is the sign of a healthy religion to *have* a theology and *not* to be aware of it.

3) There were some technical objections to the assertion that

Judaism had a theology. Strictly speaking, theology means "the science of God." Traditionally, however, Judaism has always had little to say about God other than that He exists, that He is One and His acts are recognized in history, and that He requires certain things of His creatures. Maimonides developed this indigenous Jewish approach in his doctrine of negative differentiation with the well-known paradoxical consequence that the more you assert of God the less you know about Him. In fact one recent thinker insists upon regarding the Bible as "God's anthropology," (God's view of man) rather than man's theology.[7] Another writer who sees the Halakhah as central likes to believe that rather than a theology what we have is a "Theonomy," a Divine Law.[8] In a current review of Rabbi Soloveitchik's work, his theology is respectfully referred to as a "Misnagid phenomenology."[9] But all of these different names merely help to point up emphases or an approach. In the larger sense with which we are concerned, these are *all* theology.

4) Another reason why theology was never encouraged in Judaism is because certain aspects of theology were considered dangerous to Judaism. For example, dogmatics is a part of theology. There were always many who feared the reduction of Judaism to thirteen principles (of Maimonides) or three principles (according to Rabbi Joseph Albo), with the implication that all else is perhaps not important. It is the same psychology that is behind the warning to be as careful with a minor *mitzvah* as with a major one.[10] It was the same fear which prompted the Chatam Sofer, when asked "How many basic principles does Judaism have?", to answer, "613"! Another integral part of Jewish Theology has always been an investigation of the reasons for the *mitzvot*. Here, too, tradition has always sensed a danger! King Solomon is held up as the paradigm of one who would use his understanding of the purpose behind the *mitzvah* to reason his way to a personal exemption.[11] In this connection Maimonides' presentation of the reasons for the *mitzvot* did indeed confirm the fears of the traditionalists. The worst fear of all, however, was based on the association of theology with Rationalism as a philosophic school. For many, the inevitable result of theologizing was to end up with religious beliefs based

on fickle reason rather than unswerving faith. And the proof of the weakness of the former was seen in the large scale defection of Jews to Christianity in Spain during the massacres of 1391. In France and Germany during the terrible persecutions of the 13th and 14th centuries, the Ashkenazic communities stood firm. In Spain at the end of the 14th and early 15th centuries a large proportion succumbed. The crucial difference, such was the verdict of tradition, was to be found in the weakening of simple faith before the insidious reasoning of theology and philosophy.[12]

From the historical perspective it can be granted that there *was* justification to the fears I have just outlined. Some day, some historian of ideas is going to draw a distinction between the value of an idea itself and the use to which the idea is put by certain social groups.

Suffice it to say then, there are historical reasons why Judaism never developed a systematic, explicitly formulated theology. The point I wish to make now, however, is that today, when the Jewish community has lost its insularity, when the atmosphere is saturated with the spirit of science, the hallmark of which is skepticism of everything non-empirical, when Orthodoxy must demonstrate its superiority over rival Jewish theologies, one cannot have an intelligent, reflective Judaism either for oneself or for others without developing some kind of theology, some kind of religious philosophy in the broad sense. Once modern man has tasted of the fruit of the tree of philosophic sophistication, he cannot go back to the Eden of simple faith. Once man becomes aware of his epistemological nakedness, God Himself must help him to fashion a conceptual garment. Even in our classic age we were told that we must know what to answer the heretic.[13] The heretic by definition was never interested in mere information. His questions required a *justification* of Judaism. To answer him one had to know theology. Today the questioning aspect of the heretic has been internalized. The demand for justification is within each of us. And the knowledge of what to answer must be built into our educational agencies if Judaism is to have a future.

As far as the dangers are concerned, most of those that I

have outlined can, I believe, be avoided by the new approach to theology which contemporary philosophy makes possible and whose main characteristics I shall outline later.

What specifically is to be expected from a Jewish theology? 1) Theology is needed to *explicate* various principles of Judaism which are not at all clear from the Bible and Talmud. For example, medieval Jewish Philosophy focused upon the concept of God, His Unity and His attributes, what we can know about God and what we cannot. This was of permanent value and is quite relevant to the crisis in contemporary Jewish thought. An example of something still needed, however, is a clarification of our *eschatological* concepts — Messiah, world to come, and resurrection — not an anthology of relevant passages but a systematic working through of these principles showing their meaning and implications.

2) Theology is needed to show the *relationship* between various principles of Judaism. For example, I once attempted to show how the Kabbalistic thinkers alone preserved the dynamic characteristics of the concept of God's Unity and that it is within *this* concept that one is to find the impulse and the origin of the concept of ultimate and inevitable redemption.[14] *Achdut,* unity, implies *malkhut,* kingship, and, as Rabbi M. Ch. Luzzatto points out, there is the notion of an *achdut bishlitah* which is implicit in Rashi's comment on the *Shema.* It happens that neither Saadia nor Maimonides nor Yehuda Halevi emphasized this point. Why is it important to know this? First, so that when we say the *Shema* we can concentrate on the full meaning of this important principle. Secondly, so that when we hear a prominent scholar saying that the Jews invented the Messianic vision because they had a lack-lustre origin, we will be able to supply the correct explanation.[15]

Another illustration of an outstanding relationship with important practical bearing is the problem of ethics and its relationship to God. Is something good because God wants it that way or does God want it that way because it is good? Our whole understanding of the Akedah (the binding of Isaac) depends upon how we resolve this issue.

3) A third task for theology is to reconcile apparent conflicts

between various principles such as between human freedom and divine omniscience, or between God's justice and God's mercy. This task is too well known to require further elucidation.

I wish to draw your attention to the fact that the three aforementioned tasks are of an *internal* nature arising out of the *inner needs* of Judaism. None of these functions can be thought of as being motivated by an unholy desire to reconcile Judaism with anything foreign. None of these inquiries comes about through forbidden questions of the category: "what is above and what is below, what is before and what is after." They come to the surface simply because a Jew reflects about his Judaism. And that a Jew *may* reflect about his Judaism, — nay *ought* to reflect upon his Judaism — was long ago demonstrated by a Saadia, a Maimonides, a Bachya.

The Jew, however, no matter how pious, doesn't simply sit and contemplate his Torah. We live and move in history and the theoretical principle, clarified or not, sooner or later comes into abrupt confrontation with the jagged and indifferent edge of experience.

There is the problem of evil — the problem of the suffering of the righteous and the good fortune of the wicked — which has vexed and tortured believers from Job onwards. There is conflict with science regarding the origin of species and the age of the earth, with pertinent historical findings, with widely-held psychological theories. Under the pressure of these confrontations we are sent back *both* to re-examine our principles and to apply our critical faculties to the findings of science — and out of this intellectual ferment more Jewish Theology is born. But how can we neglect to mention the challenge to Jewish thought that is presented by the unique and awesome historic experiences of our own day. Nothing so pointedly illustrates at once *the need for,* and *our lack of* a Jewish theology, than our failure to grapple on a theological level with the meaning of an Auschwitz, the State of Israel, and the implications of the Space Age (Rabbi Norman Lamm's article on "The Religious Implications of Extraterrestrial Life" in the spring 1966 issue of *Tradition* is a good beginning), and to