

REVIEW ARTICLE:

Michael Wyschogrod

Professor Wyschogrod, a member of TRADITION's Editorial Board and a frequent contributor, teaches philosophy at the City University of New York.

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There is a well known Chassidic story about the rabbi who, upon the death of his father, assumed the leadership of the community. He immediately instituted some changes in the mode of service. When criticized for departing from the way of his father, he replied: "I am following my father to the dot. When he assumed leadership of the community, he also made some changes."

Eugene Borowitz is a Reform theologian who makes changes in the Reform tradition.* In one sense he thereby ceases to be a Reform Jew since the changes he makes are rather fundamental. But in another, and I think more basic sense, he is the first Reform theologian to have appeared since the first one, whoever he may have been. If the essence of Reform is the modification of the tradition as received from one's ancestors, then one cannot remain a Reform theologian by adhering to the Orthodox Reform line; only by departing from it significantly can one remain Re-

form and this is exactly what Borowitz does. He reforms Reform, leaving behind him standard or Orthodox Reform as a relic of the past. Thus is the circle closed and new meaning given to the words of the *Hagadah*: "At first our ancestors were idol-worshippers, but now the All-Including has brought us near for his service."

In what did the idolatry of Borowitz's Reform ancestors consist? "Liberal Jewish thinkers," writes Borowitz, "have generally sought to regulate their faith by finding a universal standard of truth and re-interpreting Judaism in its terms. This standard has usually been borrowed from the philosophy current in the theologian's time and place . . ." With the standard sitting in judgment, Judaism was made to pass before it, "as a shepherd seeks out his flock, making his sheep pass under his rod," to have judgment of life and death pronounced over its parts. Those portions of the tradition which could pass muster were inscribed in the

* *A New Jewish Theology in the Making*, by EUGENE B. BOROWITZ (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968).

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book of the new Judaism. But those portions of the tradition found at variance with the standard were excluded from the book of life. Found out of consonance with the spirit of the age, the expectation was that they would retire gracefully. Only the stubborn opacity of the Orthodox who were not as impressed by the authority of the standard as their Reform co-religionists, prevented the quick burial that Judaism accords the dead. But as far as the Reform were concerned, the standard had given and the standard had taken away, blessed be the name of the standard until it would be time for the next standard to take its place.

The news is that Borowitz sees through this. He realizes that if the faith of Israel has to pass muster before any standard, it would be the standard that would reign supreme because it would determine which portions of the tradition are to live and which to die. The faith of the person who adopted such a procedure would then no longer be Judaism but would consist of the "ism" of his new standard, e.g., Kantianism, pragmatism, existentialism, etc. Furthermore, since experience teaches that philosophies come and go with increasing rapidity in an age that speeds up almost all of its processes, any person choosing to submit his Judaism to the judgment of such an extraneous standard would have to be prepared to embrace again portions of the tradition he had earlier discarded and discard some he had embraced as the philosophical fashions change and with it his standard of

judgment. It is clear to Borowitz that this is not an acceptable procedure, that intellectually it amounts to abandonment of the faith even if the reality of Jewish existence has often counteracted the intellectual error and prevented it from exerting its maximum damage.

The only alternative left to Borowitz is to make his Judaism supreme, or at least almost supreme: "The faith by which I seek to live as a liberal Jew is therefore a vigorous affirmation of the primacy of Judaism for my life if not of its absolute character." And again: "Because I assert no principle prior to Judaism, I cannot know beforehand what no longer has the power to speak to me and to guide my life." To the extent that Borowitz has an absolute standard, it is Judaism that is that standard, or at least Judaism comes closer to being an absolute standard than anything else. And yet, Borowitz refuses to assert, plainly and without qualification, that Judaism is for him an absolute standard which he accepts without modification and as it stands. He insists on reserving the right to dissent. True, there is a difference. "When in all seriousness I am moved to disagree, the responsibility now rests upon me to justify that disagreement. Previous generations of liberal Jews often acted as if Judaism had to justify itself to the Jew. I am arguing that making Jewish primary calls on me to justify myself when I dissent from it." There is no longer an attitude of sitting in judgment with the confidence that the standpoint from which the judgment emanates is

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that of modernity, enlightenment and science, as superior to the ancient mind as the jet airliner is to the oxcart. Borowitz feels that he is judged by the faith of his fathers and that dissent, even when unavoidable, must be practiced with fear and trembling and a consciousness of the weight of the tradition sanctified by the people of the covenant. Such a note was not sounded very often by the Reformers of another time.

And yet the right to dissent is stipulated by Borowitz and this is what in his view distinguishes him from the Orthodox. Liberal Judaism, even when it breaks with its past excesses, must retain a reverence for human autonomy that is characteristic of modern man. "Seriousness means that at some point in seeking to be true to oneself one turns back upon one's assumptions with enough power to ask radical questions about them." By this standard, a person born into Torah Judaism and educated in it, to whom it never occurred to question in a serious way the presuppositions of his family and community, is a person of unserious if not totally worthless Judaism. Borowitz seems to be saying that no person deserves credit simply for following the herd, even if that herd is the one that stood at Sinai. We respect people and take them seriously for what is theirs, for what they chose and made their own. But to choose something freely involves, as a precondition, that its alternate, too, be a live option which, though rejected, was in the realm of the possible, and not only theoretically but existentially. A

person for whom a life style other than the Orthodox is a psychological or sociological impossibility is therefore not a real person and his Orthodoxy is therefore not authentic because it is not a free response to the address of the covenant and the election of Israel but an act of conformity to psychological and therefore human pressures. Tradition without autonomy is therefore destructive of human individuality and that is why autonomy, for Borowitz, is indispensable to liberal Judaism.

For Orthodoxy not to take this criticism seriously, to reply to it by the usual gambits which are rich in intellectual acumen and perhaps even dialectically valid without touching on the reality of the matter, will simply not do. The victory would be too easy.

One such ploy would be to point out to Borowitz that as long as he insists on the right to dissent, even if he practices this right with considerably more circumspection than dissenters of the past, and even if he refuses to name, ahead of time, the standard in the light of which he will make his decisions, he must of necessity wind up with such a standard, though the standard will probably turn out not to be one or another philosophical world-view but rather some version of the principle of conscience: in the final analysis I will reject what my conscience tells me not to accept. And it could then be driven home that this is a standard as foreign to the tradition as all the others used by Reformers of the past. The refutation would then conclude by a ringing reaffirmation of Orthodoxy's

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unqualified acceptance of the tradition unjudged by conscience or any other such unsettling and Halakhically unfounded considerations. Usually to this is added the observation that the Halakhah, while assigning some limited rights to conscience, certainly does not accept the principle that the individual is the final judge of the validity of the law. Leo Landman delineates some of the areas that the Halakhah leaves to individual conscience in a recent article ("Law and Conscience: The Jewish View" in *Judaism*, Winter 1969). But it seems to me he misses the crux of the matter. The problem of conscience arises only when conscience conflicts with law. When a legal system draws certain lines within which conscience is permitted to function but beyond which it may not, it misunderstands the nature of conscience. A person who exercises his conscience only where the law permits and submits to the law where the law prescribes submission irrespective of his conscience, is obeying the law instead of conscience even in those areas where, with the permission of the law, he allows himself to follow his conscience. The principle of conscience could be incorporated into a legal system only if the law were to specify that the individual is duty bound to transgress any demand of the law where his conscience so dictates. But to incorporate such a provision in a law is to destroy it as law. It therefore follows that law and conscience are irreconcilable and nothing much is to be gained by researching the rights any given legal system confers upon conscience since the con-

science encountered within the confines of the law will be a conscience tamed and therefore not the real article.

Orthodoxy will therefore not solve the problem of conscience by learned articles which elicit the bounds that the law imposes on conscience. A review such as this is of course not the place for a full theological consideration of this problem—and it must be theological rather than a Halakhic consideration because a purely Halakhic consideration would beg the question. I am, however, prepared to say this: in the final analysis it comes down to what kind of human beings are produced. If the young people Orthodoxy produces today are bellicose and narrow, assuming airs of superiority because of a profound insecurity, unable truly to listen to those with other views because deep down they know that were they to listen they would yield, if this is indeed the typical product of Orthodox education, then we have forgotten what the Torah Jew was meant to be. When it worked, the tradition produced men who were individuals, who were not frightened, who listened and loved their fellow Jews and their fellow men. A religious tradition either produces such men loved by God or it perishes. Woe to a community that mistakes scholarship for a pure heart, self-aggrandizing knowledge for the love of God.

We are glad that there is a Eugene Borowitz in the Reform camp and we look forward to talking with him more and more.