

Orthodox what?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There has been a lot of debate recently about what defines Modern Orthodoxy. The latest "term" is "Open Orthodoxy" as opposed to "Modern", "Rational", "Halachic", "Traditional", "Combination", and "Thinking". Such nuances are what Freud described as "the narcissisms of little differences." The sad fact is that no matter what arguments one version presents to justify its position, the other side will pay no attention, just react with invective in protection of its own absolutely authentic position (or so it claims). The eagerness with which one group attacks the other underlines one of the major failures of religion.

Does being Orthodox (whatever that means) depend on whether you believe every word of the Torah was dictated by God to Moses on Sinai? Or most? Or written down over time? And if you don't know and keep an open mind, does that make you a heretic? If you think the Zohar was not all written by Rebbi Shimon Bar Yochai, does this mean you are a traitor? Do you have to believe a Messiah will come riding on a white donkey and all the dead will be resurrected? And what degree of practice must you adhere to? If you do not wear a black hat or a Shtreimel or your wife does not wear a wig, does that exclude you? If you do not ask your rabbi about what new car to get or what business to invest in, does this make you a nonbeliever? What's wrong with us?

Does it matter if I have absolutely no idea what happens after I die or if I will be resurrected, whereas others claim to know exactly what will? Does it really matter if one is moderately Orthodox, very Orthodox, extremely Orthodox or fanatically Orthodox? Is it really theology or just the natural human tendency towards particularism, conformity, belonging? If I behave according to traditional Jewish law, its rituals, its principles and its ideals, why should intellectual reservations make any difference? After all, if every human being's physical characteristics are different, aren't their brains and thought patterns different too? If we do not expect everyone to be the same physically, why do we expect them all to think the same way or to believe exactly the same thing?

When one thinks that most religions ostensibly preach being a good, caring, peaceful human being who tries to establish a relationship of some sort with the spiritual, why do we insist on everyone having to think exactly the same way? After all as the prophet Micah famously said "what God requires of you is to do justice, to love kindness and walk humbly with God." Of course he did not mean that one does not have to do other things too, but there have to be overriding humane principles, priorities.

And yet in every religion you have aggressive, assertive, narrow-minded bullies who insist that everyone else has to think and act just like them or else. Every single religion I know of is riven with schisms and conflicts over authority, authenticity, and power. Why do Shia and Sunni hate each other yet both reject the Ahmadis? If you think we have too many "names",

just try Christianity or Islam or Buddhism. Everywhere, men and women are convinced that they are the sole possessors of the right and true way and everybody else is wrong or evil.

You will very rarely find two people able to articulate the same ideas about what they think God is. Even the great Maimonides could only say what God was not. Yet we religious are all expected to believe in exactly the same thing, in the same way. Why do we hate each other for being in a different religion or a different denomination or a different sect? I wonder if it isn't all about insecurity. And I wonder if one of the negative side-effects of religion is that it often expects people to lie. After all, if you express your doubts, you are often going to run the risk of being labelled a heretic.

Christianity invented orthodoxy. "Ortho" meaning "right" and "dox" meaning belief, "orthodoxy" means having the right beliefs. The Nicene Creed was the first list of correct beliefs, and early Christians killed vast numbers of each other over it. In Judaism it was more a matter of "orthoprax"—the correct behavior—that counted. But tending, as we Jews do, to be influenced by what is going on around us, we too eventually adopted the term, mainly as a way of distinguishing an established expression of Judaism from a reformed version (around the time of what is fancifully called the "Enlightenment", when we grew so unenlightened we killed off even more human beings simply because they were different).

So we have an alien term in an alien language. But even that wasn't good enough, because we have added ultra-Orthodox, Charedi, Charedi Light and Charedi Heavy Duty, Charedi Nationalist and Charedi anti-Zionist. In truth all of this only matters to a few small-minded sectarians, and even they will ignore their own standards when money and power are concerned.

Thankfully, external forces have come to the rescue. In our open modern societies there is great flexibility. One can move from one community, one congregation, one style of praying to another for spiritual or emotional support. One just has to find the place or places where one feels comfortable, where one can relax and allow the spiritual side to flourish in whatever way works. It is true that each one has its own rules, dress codes, opinions, theologies, and customs, and one learns to be a chameleon and be adaptive. The answer? Learn the rules and conventions, and nurture your own soul. That is the only orthodoxy you need to know! If you want another label, call it Existential Orthodoxy!!! And avoid the zealots.

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