JUDAISMS IN MODERN TIMES:
TOWARD A GENERAL THEORY

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In modern times a long-established system of Judaism formed in ancient days—a world view, way of life, addressed to a distinctive Israel, framed in response to urgent and perennial questions—lost its paramount position. That received Judaic system gave way to new Judaisms—that is, Judaic systems, each with its own set of self-evidently true answers to ineluctable questions. Each of these systems in its way claimed to take the natural next step in “Jewish history,” or in the “tradition” or to constitute the increment of Judaism (the tradition) in its unfolding, linear history. All of them were wrong, and, in erring gloriously in perfect self-delusion, each one has testified to the powerful imagination of humanity, to the courage of people to face urgent questions and to compose, in solving them, systems of belief and behavior capable of creating whole worlds of meaning: sensibility and sense alike.

I. Theses on Judaisms in Modern Times

“A Judaism” is a species of the genus, “religious system of the social order,” and what is meant by both terms requires definition. A religious system comprises [1] a world-view, explaining who a group of people say they are, where they come from, what they must do, [2] a way of life, expressing in concrete deeds that world view and linking the life of the individual to the polity, and [3] an account of the particular social group, in the case of a Judaic system, an “Israel,” to whom the world-view and way of life refer. A Judaic system, or, simply, a Judaism, therefore comprises a world-view, a way of life, and a group of Jews who hold the one and live by the other and call themselves “Israel” or regard themselves as the continuation of that “Israel” of which Scripture speaks. Modern and contemporary
times have witnessed the birth of a number of Judaisms or Judaic systems of the social order.

When we wish to speak of the birth of a Judaism, therefore, we point to the time and circumstance in which a given world-view, way of life, and social group coalesced in a definitive way. How do we discern that moment of coalescence? We look for the resort to a striking and also distinctive symbol, something that expresses the whole all together and all at once. For the symbol—whether visual or verbal, whether in gesture or in song or in dance or in—even—the definition of the role of woman—will capture the whole and proclaim its special message: its way of life, its world view, its definition of who is Israel.

Through the history of the Jewish people, diverse Judaisms have won the allegiance of groups of Jews here and there, each system specifying the things it regards as urgent both in belief and in behavior. All systems in common allege that they represent the true and authentic Judaism, or Torah, or will of God for Israel, and that their devotees are Israel. Those that differ are not. Each ordinarily situates itself in a single historical line—hence, a linear history—from the entirety of the past. Commonly a Judaism sees itself as the natural outgrowth, the increment of time and change. These traits of historical or even supernatural origin characterize nearly all Judaisms. How then do we know one Judaism from another? When we can identify the principal symbol to which a given system on its own appeals, we realize that we have a wholly distinct and distinctive system in prospect.

What forms the fact is what the earliest generations of the aborning Judaic system find self-evident: the truths that demand no articulation, no defense, no argument. What is self-evident forms the system and defines its generative exegetical principles. And if I want to know what people find self-evident, I have to uncover the questions they confront and cannot evade. These questions will dictate the program of inquiry, the answers to which then follow after the fact. If I know what issues of social existence predominate, I can also uncover the point—the circumstance—of origin of a Judaism. To be sure, no one claims to know the source of urgent questions: whether political, whether cultural, whether formed within the received condition of the faith, whether framed by forces outside. Debates on such issues of beginnings rarely yield consensus. The reason is simple.