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## Authenticity, Identity, Scholarship

In 1996 there erupted a controversy at Queens College in the City University of New York (CUNY). The dean of the college had just appointed Thomas Bird, a Russian and Yiddish literature professor, as the head of the interdisciplinary Jewish studies program. Although Bird was a scholar of Yiddish language and culture, and a longtime activist on behalf of Soviet Jews, he was not Jewish. Samuel Heilman, Bird's colleague and an Orthodox Jew, objected to his appointment. He reasoned that because Bird was not Jewish, did not know Hebrew (even though he knew Yiddish), and had not published articles in mainstream Jewish studies journals, he was unqualified to direct the Jewish studies program (Greenberg 1996). Little over two weeks into his new and now highly contentious position, Bird resigned, citing what he called "primitive religious bigotry." He claimed that "it is impossible not to conclude that the attempt to trash my academic record and standing in the community through insinuation and omission is anything other than a fig leaf for objections to my being a gentile" (Greenberg 1996).

At the height of the controversy, just after Bird had resigned his position, Heilman, the principle accuser, published a short essay entitled "Who Should Direct Jewish Studies at the University?" Therein he mentioned that he was less interested in whether or not Bird was Jewish than the fact that he did not have a PhD (although an associate professor, he was still a doctoral candidate at Princeton). In particular, Heilman writes,

If the university singles out Jewish Studies and appoints a person to head it who does not come from that ethnic group, at a time when all its other ethnic studies programs are headed by members of those ethnic groups, who does not have the same high academic qualifications as those in other programs, and when the administration chooses

not to appoint as Jewish Studies director one of the many professors on campus who hold the highest academic degrees and have distinguished reputations and records in Jewish Studies, and read and understand Hebrew in favor of someone who does not, then there ought to be some compelling reason for that decision. (Heilman 1996)

This is a strange claim. Since other area studies at his university happen to have directors or chairs that are the same ethnicity, gender, or color as the administrative unit they lead, Heilman thinks that Jewish studies should be no different. If others are engaged in identity politics, he reasons, so, too, must Jewish studies. Heilman also faults Bird for the fact that he does not know Hebrew and, in so doing, makes the problematic assertion that Hebrew somehow represents *the* authentic Jewish language. Bird's lack of knowledge in Hebrew—at least in Heilman's worldview—seems to disqualify him from administering a program in Jewish studies. This creates two problems. First, would Heilman have put up such linguistic objections if Bird was Jewish? That is, would Heilman object to a Jewish director of Jewish studies who did not know Hebrew? Second, and relatedly, Heilman ignores the fact that Jews throughout their long and diverse history have not only spoken but also articulated Judaism using Greek, Aramaic, Arabic, and countless European vernaculars. The result is that all these languages could just as easily be regarded as “Jewish” languages (Hughes 2012). Heilman, in other words, is making a number of normative judgments that should make us uncomfortable: not only does he attempt to articulate what is authentically “Jewish” and “not-Jewish,” but he engages in a slippery argument that those most qualified to direct (and presumably teach) Jewish studies are Jews. He nowhere says, however, what kind of Jews. Are Reform Jews better than secular ones? Does this, then, make Conservative Jews better than Reform? Or, are Orthodox (or, even, ultra-Orthodox) the most qualified because they are somehow deemed the most “authentic”?

Although in principle he states that his objection is with Bird's academic credentials, it soon becomes evident that this is not all that Heilman has in mind. For, in addition to the above statement, he claims that Jewish studies faculty “can and do also serve as role models for students and the larger Jewish community, embodying what it means to take Jewish life and culture seriously.” Presumably by this latter comment—that a director of Jewish studies needs to “take Jewish life and culture seriously”—Heilman means that one can only do this by being Jewish and that a non-Jew cannot presumably undertake

such activity or at least do so with any degree of competence. Again, this creates a host of uncomfortable distinctions: does a Jew who is *shomer shabbas* (i.e., follow all the legal restrictions of the Sabbath), for example, take Judaism more “seriously” than a Jew who does not? The repercussions of such statements are problematic on a number of levels.

Whether he knows it or not, Heilman, trained as a sociologist, invokes a well-worn trope in religious studies, that of taking Judaism (or, religion in general) “seriously.” This trope—and all of the unchecked assumptions that it implies—forms the subject matter of this chapter. What Heilman clearly verbalizes, a position that I have heard articulated in numerous other settings, is that non-Jews should not or cannot study Jews or Judaism. (Although, to be fair, I have also heard the opposite claim, namely, that what Jewish studies truly needs is for more non-Jews to study Judaism.) Whether because they lack the specialized linguistic training, as Heilman implies, or because they do not know what it means to live or experience the world “Jewishly,” the role of the non-Jew in the academic study of Judaism potentially raises a host of problems. Just as the “Jew” has functioned as the symbol par excellence against which Christian Europe has largely defined itself since the time of Jesus, the “non-Jew” now becomes a symbol whereby Jewish studies articulates itself, its object of study, and attempts to define who possesses the authority to study it properly.

The Heilman-Bird controversy provides an interesting, if acute, example of the way in which identity, authenticity, and scholarship play out in the academic study of Judaism. In so doing, it also functions metonymically for a set of issues that plagues and ultimately threatens the well being of the larger field of religious studies. That is, how does scholarship—whether associated with Judaism or with any other religion—create or establish a set of conditions that manufacture, assert, and subsequently disseminate notions of identity and authenticity? Since the academic study of religion purports, according to some, to study that which is most dear and precious to people (i.e., their “inner” and “spiritual” lives), there exists the dangerous assumption that only those who have had the same kind of “inner experiences” are uniquely qualified to study and write about the religion in question.

Such an assumption, however, is predicated on a number of nebulous concepts that are impossible to verify or subject to any sort of intellectual scrutiny. What, for example, is an “inner experience” (see the discussion in Scharf 1999)? Even if we could ascertain

what it is, who would be in a position to adjudicate what counts as an authentic “inner experience” and what counts as an inauthentic one? The answer to questions such as these is political and ideological, not natural or scientific. Such “experiences,” moreover, are often assumed to be irreducible as opposed to culturally or ideologically constructed. This means that religion in general—or religions (e.g., Judaism) in particular—is assumed to possess an essence that cannot be reduced to other material or historical forces (for a critique of this, see McCutcheon 1997, 35–37). As others have well shown, however, the discourse of an irreducible or *sui generis* experience or set of experiences is of fairly recent provenance, largely operating as a rhetorical response to certain critiques of religion in the West, most notably Kant’s reduction of religion to a set of ethical claims (see, e.g., Proudfoot 1985; Scharf 1999). Despite this, many—both inside and outside of the academy—have no qualms about taking this manufactured and ideologically charged concept of experience and then claiming that it exists naturally in the world. These “experiences”—in turn connected to an “essence”—are subsequently reified as “Jewish” (or “Muslim,” or “Buddhist,” or whatever other religion one happens to study) and then projected onto distant times and places.

This projection, however, is tied to both essentialism and identity politics. How can we assume, for example, that the way in which Judaism was constructed in third-century CE Palestine (or eleventh-century Cordoba) is the same as that constructed in contemporary America? Not only is third-century Palestinian Judaism pretalmudic,<sup>1</sup> but the varieties of Judaism in contemporary America did not even exist in the third or eleventh century. Despite its constructed nature, we frequently feel comfortable speaking about “*the* Jewish experience”—not even the less, but still problematic, “Jewish experiences”—as if it (a) really existed and (b) it is monolithic at all times and all places. Yet, as Russell McCutcheon has well argued, the attempt to create an irreducible religious experience—or one of its numerous species, such as “Jewish experience”—is primarily a sociopolitical claim (McCutcheon 1997, 16). This claim not only reifies a particular “experience”; it also authorizes—as we see in the Heilman-Bird controversy—those who can (or cannot) study it.

The academic study of Judaism, as we shall see in the following chapter, was largely created for apologetical purposes, namely, to show non-Jews that Jews, too, possessed an essence that manifested itself in the historical record. Jewish history could, in turn, be quantified and taxonomized in the same manner that the histories of other peoples/nations could. Because of this, and owing to the fact that Jewish topics were forbidden from being taught in German universi-

ties and were instead largely taught at denominationally affiliated seminaries, non-Jews tended not to be interested in studying Judaism or Jewish data.<sup>2</sup> Now, however, as Jewish studies has become a valid field of study that has become firmly entrenched within the humanities and social sciences curriculum, Judaism ought to be the subject of analysis in the same manner that every other religion is; that is, something that can be studied by those who are of the particular religion and those who are not. Yet, despite the change in intellectual contexts and the inclusion and normalization of Jewish studies within the contemporary university, the tension nevertheless remains concerning who is authorized to study Jews and Judaism.

### David Gelernter's Judaism: A Way of Being

A good example of the reification and essentialization of Judaism to make it conform to a prefabricated set of expectations is David Gelernter's *Judaism: A Way of Being* (2009). Gelernter, a professor of computer science at Yale University, received permanent damage to his right hand and eye on account of a mail bomb sent to him by Theodore Kaczynski (the "Unabomber"). Prior to the bombing, Gelernter identified as a secular Jew, afterward becoming increasingly religious.<sup>3</sup> Gelernter is also a frequent columnist for neo-conservative magazines such as *Commentary* and the *Weekly Standard*. This political position seems, as we shall see shortly, to have made its way into his *Judaism: A Way of Being*. This latter work—bankrolled by Roger Hertog, the conservative American philanthropist and chairman of the Tikvah Fund (see chapter 5 in this work)<sup>4</sup>—basically amounts to neoconservative screed for a particular version of Judaism, that is, Orthodoxy, that the author deems most authentic (for a critique of the Tikvah fund more generally and its desire to situate itself within academic study of Judaism, see Braiterman 2011).

Although he has no academic training in either religious studies or Jewish studies, Gelernter takes it upon himself in *Judaism: A Way of Being* to encapsulate the religion for what he considers to be a lost generation. It is, in other words, a fairly typical book written by a Jew for other Jews warning them about the evils of secularism and intermarriage. The difference, however, and what makes it interesting in the present context, is that it just happens to be published by Yale University Press. In the book's opening, Gelernter argues that "unless the *essence* of Judaism is written down plainly as can be, the loosening grip most American Jews maintain on the religion of their ancestors will fail completely, and the community will plummet into

the anonymous depths of history" (2009, 3; my italics). What might this essence consist of? For Gelernter, it coincides, as he makes clear on the book's first page, with normative, that is "Orthodox" Judaism (2009, ix). Orthodox Judaism's teachings about Jewish chosenness, gender relations, and the answers it supplies to "the great questions of human existence" are the only ones that the author finds worthy of consideration (for a critical and informed review, see the comments in E. Wolfson 2010). Orthodoxy, for the author, represents "Judaism at full strength, straight up; no water, no soda, aged in oak for three thousand years" (2009, xi). Rival Judaisms—Reform, Conservative, egalitarian, secular, and the like—are, in comparison, implied to be watered down.

Not only has Gelernter defined Judaism's essence as that which corresponds to Orthodoxy, not surprisingly his own denominational commitment, but he goes on to project its essence into the spiritual core of Western civilization. In an appendix entitled "What Makes Judaism the Most Important Intellectual Development in Western History?" he writes that Judaism

[h]as given moral and spiritual direction to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim society, and indirectly to the modern and postmodern worlds. But not only that. Judaism formed our idea of God and man, of sanctity, justice, and love: love of God, family, nation, and mankind. But not only that. Judaism created the ideal of congregational worship that made the church and the mosque possible. But not only that. Much of the modern liberal state grew out of Judaism by way of American Puritans, neo-Puritans, and quasi-Puritans who revered the Hebrew Bible and pondered it constantly. (2009, 198)

This essence of Judaism, moving effortlessly throughout human history, is the origin of virtually everything that we are supposed to hold dear in the modern world. No mention is made that such ideas took shape through a synergy of "Jewish" and "non-Jewish" ideas—indeed to such an extent that it is probably impossible to pull them apart and decipher which is which. Many of the pieties and platitudes that we find in works such as Gelernter's are more appropriate for the synagogue than the academy. For it is ultimately in the former that matters such as identity creation and maintenance are never questioned, but assumed as given, something handed down from generation to generation.

Identity politics with a chaser of neo-conservatism (to keep Gelernter's alcoholic metaphor) will only end badly for Jewish stud-

ies. Once one claims to know the essence of a tradition, what it is and what it is not, inquiry gives way to apologetics, and scholarship gives way to ideology.<sup>5</sup> Gelernter's work is not a disinterested or objective work of scholarship, even though the Yale University Press imprimatur may make it appear otherwise. Rather, it is a highly partisan account of Judaism based on and funded by very interested constituents outside of the academy. Perhaps if a Jewish theological press had published it, I might not take it to task in the manner that I have here. However, the fact that it is written by a nonexpert and financed by a neoconservative philanthropist seeking to make inroads for right wing causes in Israel and in Jewish studies in America potentially sets a very dangerous precedent.

Although Gelernter's argument is different from the likes of Heilman, it nonetheless emerges from the same privileged sphere. There is an essence to Judaism that only Jews are able to access owing to their birthright or commitment to a particular denomination. Those outside the privileged sphere—non-Jews, non-Orthodox—have no or little existential access to it. This, I submit, is all that is wrong with Jewish studies at this particular moment. And unless Jewish studies confronts this, it risks being relegated to the back room of area studies and becoming confined to the dark domain of identity politics.

### Dislocating Judaism's Essence

Problems inevitably follow whenever one wants to limit who should be able to study religious data within an academic setting (with the obvious exception of academic qualification).<sup>6</sup> Heilman's desire to control who can or cannot administer Jewish studies and Gelernter's desire to proclaim that one particular version of Judaism, that is, his own, is normative reeks of apologetics. This need to find an essence that can somehow explain all later "manifestations" of the tradition is certainly not confined to the likes of Heilman's desire to maintain ethnic purity or Gelernter's misinformed apologetics for Orthodox Judaism. Many introductory textbooks also seek to discover Judaism's essence. In his *Introducing Judaism*, for example, Eliezer Segal defines this as the Law:

It must be remembered that for Jews . . . the ultimate expression of divine revelation is in the form of laws. This is certainly true for traditional Jews who believe that the most momentous event in history was when God revealed the Torah to the children of Israel at Mount Sinai. The Torah

consists primarily of laws and commandments, and it has always been assumed that the intensive study of religious law is a fundamental act of religious devotion. Jewish religious law encompasses, not only matters of belief, liturgy, and ritual, but also covers the full range of civil and criminal laws. For Jews, all these laws have their origin in a divine revelation, and their observance forms the basis of the eternal covenant between God and the people of Israel. (2009, 57)

Here Segal, an Orthodox Jew, not surprisingly makes the law and its observance into the essence of Judaism. It is, according to him, a divine revelation that *all* Jews (no mention of which Jews in particular) believe is the sine qua non of the covenant between God and Israel. What do we do with all those Jews, perhaps even the majority of Jews, who do not believe this?

Equally problematic is the attempt to define ethics or ethical monotheism as the essence of Judaism. In an essay entitled "Singularity: The Universality of Jewish Particularism," Richard A. Cohen reflects upon the ethical mission of Judaism as witnessed in two important twentieth-century Jewish thinkers, Elijah Benamozegh and Emmanuel Levinas. Cohen writes of Judaism's "holy mission":

Judaism is a religion not merely of tolerance, if by tolerance one means that one grinds one's teeth and provisionally endures alternatives. Rather, it is a religion of tolerance whose divinely revealed teachings of universal morality and justice aim to produce not a mirror image of itself, but a righteous humanity, whatever the denominational affiliation of that humanity. With the same breath with which Benamozegh and Levinas insist upon the fundamental and irreducible relevance of Judaism for Jews and non-Jews, they also insist, to the same Jews—without any diminution, condescension or duplicity—on the irreducible relevance, the universality, of Judaism for all humanity. To be chosen is to be responsible for each and everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike, "widow, orphan, and stranger." (Cohen 2010, 257–58)

Cohen here eloquently molds Judaism in the crucible provided by the ethical thought of Levinas, and the entire Jewish tradition is then retroactively interpreted in his light. This thought, revealed at Sinai and forming the essence of Judaism's universal ethical mission, is what



defines Judaism, representing—in the words of Thomas Cahill—“the gift of the Jews” (1998).

The desire to uncover in Judaism an essence—be it the Law (à la Gelernter or Segal) or ethical monotheism (à la Cohen or Cahill)—has, for various reasons, configured with the notion that Jews themselves possess a unique essence that emerges from Judaism and that differentiates them from all other peoples.<sup>7</sup> This may be the modern iteration of the biblical notion of “chosenness,” or it may simply be another example of a small minority stressing its particularism or ethnic pride. Whatever the reason, the repercussion seems to be similar: Jews possess an essence that somehow makes them predisposed or that puts them in a commanding position to study this essence, their very own essence, in history.

This tense intersection of ethnicity, identity, and scholarship represents one of the major issues currently facing the academic study of Judaism. Identity politics subscribes to a particular group a set of traits or characteristics that all members of a particular social category or group are believed to share. These traits or characteristics can subsequently be “located” or “found” in the historical record and in various times and places. Recent work by sociologists (e.g., Bourdieu 1984) and anthropologists (e.g., Bayart 2005), however, has stressed the cultural construction and manufacture of identity formations. Rather than assume that such identities are given in the natural world, then, we should perhaps focus on how they are actively constructed and imagined. In this respect, the work of Jonathan Boyarin is instructive. He writes in his “Responsive Thinking: Cultural Studies and Jewish Historiography” that much academic writing in Jewish studies is predicated on “our hold on some attachment to a positive projection of some *sui generis* core of group identity” (2008, 41). This *sui generis* core, predicated as it is upon boundary construction and maintenance, has largely dictated the way the field has thought of and constructed Jewishness in both the past and the present, deeming what counts as an authentic expression and what does not. But such decisions of authenticity or inauthenticity must be appreciated for what they are: choices based on ideology, not ontology. Boyarin concludes his essay with the claim that

[r]ather than fix on a supposedly delimited time and space as the guarantor of the purest approach to truth, let us be aware that we are constantly tacking between two formations of identity, the one (the notion of “ourselves”) inescapable for continued human life and being continually

reshaped and nurtured by the other (the “past” in its relics), and attend to our work as not simply the *knowing*, but rather the active *making* or *performance* of history. Maybe in that . . . , rather than be ultimately tempted to conclude that the question of any profound commonalities among Jews through time and space is a trick of the present, we will allow ourselves to remain humbled—not hobbled—by Paul Gilroy’s reminder that “the fragile psychological, emotional, and cultural correspondence which connect diaspora populations in spite of their manifest differences are often apprehended only fleetingly and in ways that persistently confound the protocols of academic orthodoxy.” (Boyarin 2008, 43–44)

Boyarin’s comments here are instructive for several reasons. For one thing, the creation of identity—now as in the past—is the figment of genealogical memory. In our quest for origins and authenticity, we tend to reify the history of lineage found in so much of our sources, and we do so, moreover, to such an extent that this lineage becomes elided into our own being and fabric. In this regard, Jewish studies, like any area studies, reaffirms the myth of ethnic continuity or purity through the ages. Our challenge, as intimated in Boyarin’s comments above, is not to assume that the borderlines between Jew and non-Jew represent real lines that exist naturally in the world, but to question when and how they came about, to see what kind of taxonomic work they provided in the past, including for whom and for what purposes.

Once we situate the various Judaisms of the past within the shared cultural universes in which they were actively produced, we hopefully begin to modify our understanding of what constitutes “Judaism” and “non-Judaism.” But until we do this, we will remain beholden to the same form of identity politics that has generated—and indeed continues to power—so much of the thinking within the field. As long as we tend to believe that the distant past is, again in the words of Boyarin, “somehow fixed and therefore better known than our own messy present (Boyarin 2008, 42), we will continue to reify something called “Jewishness” and continue to persevere in our desire to perceive its most authentic iterations in the historical record.

There is no such thing as “true” Jewishness, just as there cannot be any such thing as “true” Muslimness, “true” Christianness, or any other such entity. Jewishness, like any other identity formation, is continually imagined (and reimagined), invented (and reinvented), and produced (and reproduced). And if there is no such thing as

“true” Jewishness, its recuperation—whether simple or otherwise—becomes entirely problematic. On this subject of communal invention or reinvention, Miriam Bodian’s study of the invention of Sephardic Jewishness among Jews after their departure from Spain in 1492 is telling. She writes,

Living in Calvinist Amsterdam, they were more conspicuously Iberian than ever before. This was a source of pride and an important component of their developing sense of collective self. As practicing Jews in a Christian environment, there was also a clear religious boundary separating them from the majority society. Both in the habits they had assimilated from Spanish and Portuguese society and in their practice of Jewish law, they suddenly became what they had never been before, a well-defined group. (Bodian 1999, 18)

To tell this story from the perspective of “Jewish pride,” the way so many of the students I teach conceive of it, the Iberian Jews—persecuted and under pressure to convert in Spain—kept the spirit of Judaism alive in their hearts and homes (far from public gaze). And, once religiously free in a place like Amsterdam, they simply returned to their Jewish “heritage.” But such a religiously inspired narrative—as Bodian’s work so tellingly reminds us—ignores the task of communal invention and reinvention in the formation of collective identity.

### The Insider/Outsider Problem

The central question in the academic study of religion is how to understand properly the various texts, actions, behaviors, rituals, and so on that practitioners describe as “religious.” The professional religionist is presented with a great deal of religious “data” and must decide how to explain them, interpret them, and ultimately classify them. This gives way to a fairly vociferous debate known as the “insider/outsider problem.”

An insider approach—alternatively called an emic approach—is one that tries to understand religion from the perspective of religious practitioners. It involves looking at religious texts and religious rituals in order to find out the significance of these for practitioners and subsequently describes their contents and performances to others. Many who privilege the insider perspective believe that there is something unique about religion and religious experience that can

never be reduced to something else (e.g., culture, society, politics) or explained away. The insider approach represents, in sum, the effort to understand religious thought and behavior primarily from the point of view of religious persons.

The outsider perspective—or alternatively, the etic approach—is one that refuses to explain religion using the categories and terms of reference that religious people use. As such, it attempts to import categories from the outside in an attempt to interpret or explain religious data. This can be reductionist; witness Sigmund Freud's desire to "reduce" religion to psychological function and explain it using the language of psychology or Emile Durkheim's reduction of religion to social processes. Increasingly, such approaches tend to question the very appropriateness of the term "religion," preferring instead to see this term as a "Western" imposition. Rather than regard religion as something internal to the individual, there is a preference to regard religion as a human creation, the site of various contestations and collaborations over ideas and terms that have been signified as divine or transcendent.

It should, hopefully, be quite clear how the insider/outsider problem fits within Jewish studies. For "insider" not only can refer to the desire to explain "religious" forms from the perspective of those who perform and believe in them but also be implicit when one engages in explanatory work, and at the same time, is a religious practitioner of the religion in question. The relationship between insiders and outsiders, however, is frequently bound up with larger theoretical issues. Does, for example, the insider who studies his or her religion present him- or herself as a metonym for the tradition? Does the insider become the resource from whom undergraduates of the same religious or ethnic persuasion can get advice? The potential—and I say potential because we should not make the simplistic claim that insiders are incapable of studying their own religion critically—problem with the insider approach is that the personal and by nature idiosyncratic beliefs and behaviors of the individual become largely untheorized (McCutcheon 2003, 345).

Heilman's comments that opened this chapter clearly reflect the biases of the insider. According to this account, the insider—based on his or her genetic, ethnic, or religious affiliation or attachment to the subject matter—possesses a unique access to the data in question. This is one of the major existential problems of both area studies and religious studies. They represent two of the primary academic fields in the human sciences in which the participant's own self-report, the so-called emic point of view, is given pride of place. In the majority

of fields, by contrast, this point of view is treated as but an additional instance of data in need of theorization.

The insider point of view (whether of the practitioner, scholar, or practitioner-scholar), however, is predicated on reified notions of identity that, as I tried to argue above, are highly problematic. Jewish identity—whether in those we study or in ourselves—is not infrequently assumed to be stable and normative. The result is that the category “Judaism” is often untheorized, assumed to be a given, and, as a result, remains connected to the interests of those who define, circumscribe, and subsequently create the very category that they seek to find in the natural world (see Hughes 2010b). On this reading, an insider approach to Judaism is potentially more problematic than that of the outsider. Assuming that the outsider has no hostile (in the case of Jewish data, this can often mean supersessionist or “anti-Semitic”) intent, his or her reading should ideally take precedence over the insider.

This perhaps sets up a false dichotomy. We should be careful of assuming that insiders are somehow rendered incompetent to function as scholars of their own tradition. In fact, as we shall see in the following chapter, one of the reasons that, since its inception as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, Jews have been the primary scholars of their own tradition is because non-Jews were either uninterested in Jewish data (at least after the birth of Jesus) or so biased and prejudiced in their interpretations of Judaism as to make such analysis worthless. Jewish studies, in other words, has had a number of external (e.g., supersessionist, anti-Semitic, disinterested) and internal (e.g., identity politics) forces that, when combined, have created a discipline that is largely peopled by insiders.



The debate between Bird and Heilman, a variation on the age-old insider/outsider problem, takes us to the crux of many of the problems that beset Jewish studies as an academic field. Is it an advocacy unit on campus—functioning as a resource for Jewish students, rallying support for Israel, and addressing anti-Semitism if and when it rears its ugly head? Or is it but one among many academic disciplines, in which case the scholar of Jewish data maintains an objective distance from his or her data and seeks to find engaged and engaging conversation partners with fellow academics in cognate disciplines. Rather than be a resource for Jewish students, such a scholar may know nothing about the intricate halakhic (legal) rules and rituals of

Judaism and may even be a vociferous critic of Israel and its right-wing policies.

A related question is what is the role of the non-Jew in the Jewish studies classroom? Numerous individuals who support financially Jewish studies programs on campus are often surprised to learn that the majority of students in our classes (not to mention, those that often do the best) are non-Jews. This potentially creates a real problem (one to be examined in chapter 3): Why, so some reason, should such donors support fellowships in Jewish studies if they are going to non-Jewish students? Although questions such as these must, for now at least, remain theoretical, it is not hard to imagine their practical consequences for the academic study of Judaism. The great paradox of Jewish studies is that despite the majority of non-Jews who take Jewish studies classes, by graduate school virtually all students specializing in Jewish data in departments of religious studies, Jewish studies, or Near Eastern studies (often with the exception of those working in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament) are Jews.

The debate between Heilman and Bird also reveals the tensions over what the goal of Jewish studies ought to be. Is it, as many believe, to show the Jewish contribution to Western civilization? The institution in which I used to teach (SUNY, Buffalo), for example, defines its mandate as “focused on teaching and scholarship related to the contributions of the Jewish tradition in the development of Western civilization.” However, many others prefer to argue that we can never articulate “Jewish” ideas, let alone “Jewish” contributions, because such ideas always respond to and are in conversation with the “non-Jewish” civilizations in which Jews live. Rather than uphold reified borders between Jews and non-Jews, borders that are often retrofitted and projected onto the past, some, myself included, argue that it might be more profitable to examine the fluidity between such terms (e.g., D. Boyarin 2004; Hughes 2010a, ix–xvii).

These are intractable debates. And it is certainly not my intention either to mediate or solve them in the pages that follow. On the contrary, my goal is to highlight them and show the various ways in which they pull the academic study of Judaism in different—often radically different—directions. In many ways, the problems besetting Jewish studies are not unlike those that other area studies programs face within the academy. Talk of a, let alone *the*, “Jewish” (or “Asian” or “female” or “Latin American” or “African American”) experience is highly problematic and full of such essentialist baggage as to make it virtually useless.

Before proceeding, however, it might be worthwhile noting that despite the overwhelming fascination of all things Jewish within Jewish studies, there nevertheless remains, in certain circles, a healthy critical approach. That is, not everyone engaged within Jewish studies examines and analyzes his or her data in an apologist manner. Given its rather lengthy history of development (the subject matter of the following chapter), Jewish studies exhibits a surprisingly eclectic range of interests and fields. It cannot simply be ignored or passed over as an advocacy unit and keeper of the Zionist flame, although in some units and programs this may well be the case.

### Between Semitism and Anti-Semitism: Religious Studies Confronts Its Inner Jew

Up to this point, I have examined the rather insular nature of Jewish studies, showing the isomorphic relationships among authenticity, identity, and scholarship. In the remaining part of this chapter, I switch focus and examine the role or trope of "Judaism" within the academic study of religion. For many theorists of religion, from Marx to Otto to Eliade, Judaism has functioned pejoratively, becoming as it were the foil against which their respective theories took shape. This connects to my larger argument in the chapter that one of the main reasons for the insularity of Jewish studies in the present has emerged through a complex set of internal and external variables, centripetal and centrifugal forces. When combined, these forces have created an apologetic tendency within Jewish studies, one that has remained there since its inception.

Jewish studies as an academic field both originated and took shape in Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century. Although some of the processes responsible for articulating this will be the subject of the following chapter, it should suffice to mention in the present context that the academic study of Judaism in this period was intertwined with much larger forces, such as anti-Semitism, the legal position of Jews within German society, and the larger issue of Jewish integration (Wiese 2005, 5). Despite the fact that many German orientalists were attracted to the exotic and "oriental" nature of the Old Testament, they did so with the aim of "delegitimizing rabbinic Hebrew and robbing modern Jews of special rights or skills in this endeavor" (Marchand 2009, 39). This is undoubtedly related to the larger context wherein "the Jew" has functioned as the quintessential

Other for much of Christian theological speculation since the time of Jesus (see Hughes 2010b), in addition to playing a negative role against which the creation of the modern nation-state in Europe, itself based on reified notions of racial and linguistic purity, took shape (e.g., Elon 2002; Steinweis 2008; and as a literary trope in Western culture, see the essays in Nochlin and Garb 1996).

A complete survey of the ways in which “Judaism” and “the Jew” have figured in European conceptions of religion in general and within the academic study of religion more particularly is beyond the scope of the present study. However, it is worth mentioning that the “Jewish Question” (Ger: “Judenfrage”; Fr: “la Question juive”) was the name given to describe the negative attitude toward the apparent and persistent singularity of the Jews as a people against the background of rising political nationalisms. Many pamphlets, treatises, and monographs were put forth to address this “Jewish Question” with an eye toward solving it. Such solutions included assimilation, emancipation, national sovereignty, deportation, and most severe of all, ultimate extermination.

Karl Marx (1818–1883)—the German philosopher, radical socialist, and theorist of religion—although of Jewish descent, was highly critical of Judaism, a religious form that he associated with “hucksterism” (Marx 1844). The catalyst of Marx’s treatise entitled “On the Jewish Question” was a treatise by the same name composed by Bruno Bauer (1843). Bauer argued that Jews could achieve political emancipation only if they relinquished their religion, which he believed to be incompatible with universal human rights. In response to Bauer, Marx differentiated between political emancipation—essentially the grant of liberal rights and liberties—and human emancipation. Whereas Bauer had argued that political emancipation is incompatible with religion (whether Judaism or Christianity), Marx argued that it was perfectly compatible with the continued existence of religion, as shown by the contemporary example of the United States. However, Marx went further and argued that political emancipation was insufficient to bring about human emancipation. Since the latter is based on the idea that each individual needs protection from other individuals, real freedom is to be found in human community, not in isolation, based on non-alienated labor (Wolff 2002, 14–37).

All is well and good, however, until Marx turns to his analysis of Judaism, which implies that the modern capitalist world is essentially the triumph of Judaism, a pseudoreligion whose god is money and exploitation:



Money is the jealous god of Israel, in face of which no other god may exist. Money abuses all the gods of man—and turns them into commodities. Money is the universal self-established *value* of all things. It has, therefore, robbed the whole world—both the world of men and nature—of its proper value. Money is the alienated essence of man's work and man's existence, and this alien essence dominates him, and he worships it. The god of the Jews has become secularized and has become the god of the world. The bill of exchange is the real god of the Jew. His god is only an illusory bill of exchange. (Marx 1844, 49)

As a result of this, Marx argues that society is *Jewish* and that everyone, including Jews and Christians, must be emancipated from it. He concludes his essay with the following: “The *social* emancipation of the Jew is the *emancipation of society from Judaism*” (1844, 51; his italics). That is, Judaism—synonymous with capitalism—has, for Marx, now become *the* problem facing all humanity. Liberation for society means transcending Judaism.

This is not the place to go into all the details of Marx's analysis of either Judaism or class warfare. It is the place, however, to note that Marx's reductionist view of religion has exercised a strong influence on the discipline of religious studies up to the present (e.g., Pals 1996, 124–57). Whether Marx is speaking metaphorically or polemically against Bauer in *The Jewish Question* is impossible to tell, but what is clearly on display is a highly anti-Semitic portrayal of Judaism as a religion of greed and selfishness that was in keeping with much conspiracy theory of the time and that was largely based on a set of perceived connections between Jews and world domination.<sup>8</sup> It is an opinion of Judaism, moreover, that even if not shared by the larger discipline of religious studies, nevertheless is present in one of its central theorists and one that has the potential to make this larger discipline rather exclusive of Jews and Judaism.

Another central figure in the development of religious studies is Rudolph Otto (1869–1937). Otto was a Protestant theologian at the University of Marburg's divinity school, and his best-known work is *The Idea of the Holy* (1958 [1917]).<sup>9</sup> Central to the work is what he describes as the experience of the holy, which he defines using the Latin term “numinous” as a mental state that “is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot

be strictly defined" (Otto 1958 [1917], 7). The numinous, then, is an experience that can be neither analyzed nor studied. It forms the root of religion and is in danger of being masked or corrupted by external forms such as prayer, liturgy, and ritual. Traditional religious expressions, in other words, represent rational and conscious expressions of what is otherwise an essentially irrational and unconscious feeling, something that forms the core of all religious expressions. This "numinous" feeling, what he sometimes refers to as "creaturely feeling" or "*mysterium tremendum*," he defines as a cross-cultural phenomenon.

Although fellow Christian theologians such as Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann would fault Otto for his focus on the irrational and his failure to characterize biblical revelation as unique, his thought and work can certainly be contextualized within the larger themes of contemporaneous Protestant theology (Alles 1996, 8–9). This theological context was one that had largely defined itself in opposition to the perceived excesses of Jewish legalism and Catholic ritualism. This legacy, according to Robert Orsi and others, remains implicit, though rarely articulated, within the history of the academic study of religion—where the religion against which all others were compared (and, indeed, still are)—has been a "domesticated civic Protestantism" (Orsi 2005, 186). The result, according to Orsi, is that religious studies has been constructed largely by means of excluding those religious forms that threaten the order and stability of Protestantism: Judaism, Catholicism, Mormonism, Pentecostalism, among others, which have largely become "relegated to the world of sects, cults, fundamentalisms, popular piety, ritualism, magic, primitive religion, millennialism, anything but "religion" (Orsi 2005, 188).

Returning to Otto and his theory of the "numinous," it is perhaps no surprise that he locates the heart or essence of religion with an internal feeling of "awe" that is far removed from ritual or liturgy. These two latter concepts are among the defining elements of both Judaism and Catholicism. Otto—as was common in so much of theorizing about religion in the twentieth century—takes something that he feels (pun intended) to be an integral part of his own religion, transforms it into a cross-cultural concept, and then projects it onto the rest of the world's "religions." Otto's preference for his own religion is perhaps best witnessed, not in *The Idea of the Holy*, but in one of the other, many books that he wrote. In 1908, ten years before he published his magnum opus, he wrote a small book entitled *The Life and Ministry of Jesus, According to the Critical Method: Being a Course of Lectures*. Therein he writes of Jesus: "He possessed such an inner concentration, such an hierarchy of powers, such a consciousness of

self and of God as were able to carry him victoriously through all the storms of life. Hence he had an inner certainty, a deep assurance, which profited in every condition and which made the plain Nazarene, the carpenter's son, superior to all the scribes, the high priests, and the Roman Procurator. He was an upright, resplendent, genuine, free-born and a truly kingly being" (Otto 1908, 82–83). Here, Otto shows Jesus' superiority to the "scribes and the high priests," which functions as fairly obvious code for the Jewish leadership at the time of Jesus. Once again, then, we are on fairly firm supersessionist terrain: Jesus transcended the religious forms of his day and in so doing became a beacon of love to the world, offering a "teaching [that] was comprehensible to the plainest man and, at the same time, full of infinite matter to the deepest" (Otto 1908, 84). Otto's predilection for his own tradition and its access to the "numinous," for example, indicated the numinous manifests in its fullest form within the (protestant) Christian faith (178).

Although not nearly as anti-Semitic as the work of Marx, we nevertheless again see how an early twentieth-century theorist of religion virtually ignores Judaism and Jewish data, except of course for the Old Testament. This ignorance, though, is not simply predicated on a lack of knowledge of Judaism, but based on the lengthy Christian concept of supersessionism. Judaism is not mentioned because implicit is the notion that it is barely a "religion" (in the sense of access to the numinous) and has been spiritually surpassed by Christianity, which can offer spiritual access to all.

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) was one of the most important theoreticians of religious studies in the twentieth century. He probably did more than anyone in the United States to popularize the academic study of religion, and he was responsible for training a generation of scholars at the divinity school at the University of Chicago. Since his death, however, his legacy has been largely thrown into disrepute owing to his essentialism, lack of historicism (see, e.g., Smith 1978, 253–59), and youthful involvement with and support for Romania's profascist and anti-Semitic Iron Guard (see, e.g., Strenski 1987, 92–103; Dubuisson 2006).<sup>10</sup> Some contend that the latter support for fascism made its way into his theory of religion, which was predicated on the notion that true, authentic religious experience takes place in the countryside among rural or "archaic" people (e.g., Berger 1994, 51–74; Dubuisson 2006, 189–208).

In his desire to construct a "morphology of the sacred" (Eliade 1958, 7–14), Eliade is quick to differentiate between what he calls "*homo religiosus*" and "modern man." The former, often romantically

conceived of as a peasant whose existence is imbued with folk customs handed down through the centuries, is contrasted with denizens of cities, those whose lives are characterized by the absence or displacement of the so-called “sacred.” In a striking juxtaposition between these two types of individuals, Eliade argues,

Religious man assumes a particular and characteristic mode of existence in the world. . . . Whatever the historical context in which he is placed *homo religiosus* always believes that there is an absolute reality, *the sacred*, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real . . . [N]onreligious man refuses transcendence, accepts the relativity of “reality,” and may even come to doubt the meaning of existence . . . [H]e refuses all appeals to transcendence. (1959, 202–203)

Without getting into the obvious problems with such ontological essentialism and the ambiguous use of the term “sacred,” Eliade is here mistrustful of the pull of history (which removes *homo religiosus* from his or her experience with the sacred) and the city, which contributes to this displacement. Keeping in mind Eliade’s commitment to and support for Romanian fascism, his mistrust of the city—in Eastern European folklore, the home of “the money-lending Jews”—can be read in counterpoint with the countryside, the locus of pure Romanian *Volkreligion*.

Unlike the world of nature, which functions as the locus of the sacred, Eliade argues that the city exacerbates the dislocation of modernity. Eliade, thus, seems to be working with the traditional romantic stereotype that argues that cities are places of sin, corruption, and greed; whereas it is only in the countryside that one encounters authentic forms of religious expression (Orsi 1999, 3–13). Implicit here is the assumption that city life is frantic, frenetic and unstable, a place of moral depravity where different religions and ethnic groups bump against one another and mix and mingle. The result is that city life is traditionally characterized as a place of alienation, of strangeness, and of inauthenticity. Rural life, on the other hand, is associated with simplicity and a purity of place, where concepts such as multiculturalism and complex religious forms are absent. Rural life and peasant religion is an intersection of wholeness and of authenticity.

Although many claim that nothing anti-Semitic can be found in Eliade’s postwar writings, it seems quite clear that his tidy distinctions between the sacrality of religion and the profanity of history,