

# Jewish theology and Jewish studies in Germany

Reflections in relation to the development of the research field in Norway

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ABSTRACT • This article presents some insights into the German developments of studying Judaism and the Jewish tradition and relates them to the ongoing development of the subject at universities in the Nordic countries in general and Norway in particular. It also aims to present some conclusions concerning why it might be interesting for Norwegian society to intensify the study of Judaism at its universities.

## Jewish studies in Germany: three branches

In 2018, we celebrated the bicentenary of the programmatic declaration of the necessity of a 'Science of Judaism' by Leopold Zunz (1794–1886).¹ When the science of Judaism (Wissenschaft des Judentums) evolved at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it intended through both theological and secular studies to prove the general value of Jewish culture and civilisation. Access to the public university system was denied until after the Shoah. Since then, Jewish studies have been established at various German universities.

In 2015, Shmuel Feiner described how in the last twenty-five years Germany – besides the USA and Israel – has developed into one of the three biggest, most dynamic and most influential centres for Jewish Studies worldwide (Feiner 2017: 7). Currently, some twenty universities contribute to this impressive network of Jewish teaching and research.

1 For an introduction to life and work of Leopold Zunz, see Schorsch 2016.

Currently, there are some twenty Jewish studies degree programmes offered at German universities with an estimated 1,000 students at undergraduate and graduate level. There are two excellence clusters: the College of Jewish Studies in Heidelberg with ten professorial chairs, affiliated to the Central Council of Jews in Germany, and the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam.<sup>2</sup> Heidelberg and the Potsdam School of Jewish Theology alone have approximately 300 students, Jewish studies in Potsdam another 60. The Selma Stern Centre for Jewish Studies, Berlin-Brandenburg, founded in 2012 as a joint initiative of the universities in the capital region, adds 60 postgraduate and research students.3

The first German institute of Jewish studies was founded in Berlin as late as 1963. Adolf Leschnitzer (1899–1980), Ernst Ludwig

- 2 See the websites of Hochschule für Jüdische Studien and the School of Jewish Theology, Universität Potsdam.
- 3 See Selma Stern Zentrum für Jüdische Studien Berlin-Brandenburg's website.

Ehrlich (1921–2007; one of the last students of the Berlin Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums), Hermann Levin Goldschmidt (1914-98), Johann Maier (b. 1933) and Jacob Taubes (1923-87) offered courses on various subjects in the field - which led to the founding of an institute of Jewish studies. The department of Berlin's Freie Universität was originally conceived as denominationally defined, alongside institutes for Protestant and Catholic theology; the Protestant theologian Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt gave the following summary: 'That now together with both theologies, an institute for Jewish studies has also finally been founded - this is something for which there has long been a need, emanating from the spirit of political consciousness and responsibility of the Free University in particular' (Marquardt 2012: 36). Initially however, Jewish studies took a largely philological route and the Free University emerged as a centre of excellence under the auspices of the renowned Peter Schäfer, who went to Princeton and is currently director of the Jewish Museum, Berlin.

In 1994, a Jewish studies programme was established at the University of Potsdam. It had a distinctively different orientation, focusing on cultural studies and trying to be as interdisciplinary as possible (Grözinger 2014). From this new foundation emerged a bipolar approach to studying Judaism (Lehnhardt 2017: 1).

'Judaistik' – known internationally both as *Judaic studies* and *Jewish studies* – dealt with research on and the portrayal of Judaism in all of its historical forms up to the present day. In the Anglo-American context, this also includes what is known as 'Jewish Civilisation', and today comprises, accordingly, the history of religion, culture, philosophy, literature, and Hebrew language, as well as the general history of Judaism – both within and outside the Diaspora – from its beginnings to the present day. Judaic and Jewish studies see themselves – like Islamic studies – as a philological and historical discipline,

integrating cultural and sociological approaches while, at the same time, working comparatively. It is a secularly oriented subject, which, in Germany, is organised into two professional associations: Verband der Judaisten in Deutschlands (Association of Judaic Scholars in Germany), founded in 1974, and Vereinigung für Jüdische Studien (Association for Jewish Studies), founded in 1996.

Judaic und Jewish studies should not, however, be understood as opposing, but as complementary, disciplines.4 Jewish theology adds another aspect and distinguishes itself in that it is religiously affiliated, is taught by Jewish university lecturers with the approval of the Jewish community, and facilitates the professional goal of the training of Jewish clergy, both rabbis and cantors. Since 2013, the School of Jewish Theology of the University of Potsdam has, therefore, been contributing a third perspective to Jewish academic activity, providing reflection and instruction on Jewish belief and tradition in a living religious context. The aim of this article is to present Jewish theology as a new university subject and its implications within the context of Jewish studies as well as other theologies.

## Jewish theology: aims and development

Rabbi Louis Jacobs (1920–2006) clearly illustrated the difference between denominational Jewish theology und secular Jewish studies using the example of Jewish history:

Jewish theology differs from other branches of Jewish learning in that its practitioners are personally committed to the truth they are seeking to explore. It is possible, for instance, to study Jewish history in a completely

4 Schäfer and Herrmann 2012: 53, fn 2. Here, it is stated that both Judaic and Jewish Studies can be traced back to the 'Wissenschaft des Judentums' (science of Judaism), which also contains theological components; see p. 55.

detached frame of mind. The historian of Jewish ideas or the Jewish people or Jewish institutions need have no wish to express Jewish values in his own life. He need not be a Jew at all. ... But while the historian asks what has happened in the Jewish past, the theologian asks the more personal question: what in traditional Jewish religion continues to shape my life as a Jew in the here and now? The historian uses his skills to demonstrate what Jews have believed. The theologian is embarked on the more difficult, but, if realised, more relevant, task of discovering what it is that a Jew can believe in the present. (Jacobs 1973: 1)<sup>5</sup>

The questions raised by Jewish theology have long been asked. Already in the tenth century, Saadia Gaon (882–942) produced the work which is regarded as the first systematic Jewish theology, his *Sefer ha-emunot ve-ha-deot* ('The Book of Beliefs and Opinions', written in Arabic around 933).

'Jewish theology' as a university subject, however, was only formally developed and used as a term in the modern era by Rabbi Abraham Geiger (1810–74). The 'Wissenschaft des Judentums' (science of Judaism) formed the background to his efforts, which he established as a historical discipline on the basis of the philosophically aligned Haskalah (i.e. the Jewish Enlightenment) (Herzig 2002: 146–52, 158–64). For Judaism, both the 'Wissenschaft des Judentums' and the Haskalah signified an arousal from the long slumber of what could be termed a 'Dark Age' of the spirit (see Wilhelm 1967: 1–59 and Ucko 1967: 315–52).

5 This concurs with Schleiermacher's dictum, according to which all the subjects and topics of theology could actually be materials of other sciences, with theology hence basically possessing no object of research within the House of Sciences. Cf. Marquardt 2012: 38.

The call for a Jewish theological faculty grew louder in the context of the Jewish struggle for emancipation in the German states at the beginning of the nineteenth century, for example from rabbis such as Ludwig Philippson (1811-89). In 1835, independently of Abraham Geiger, Philippson expressed his wish for a Jewish seminary in his magazine Predigtund Schulmagazin. In 1837, in the Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums, he published his 'Call to all Israelites in Germany' to provide the means for a Jewish theological faculty and seminary (Philippson 1837: 349). His elder brother Phöbus Philippson (1807-70) proposed, in a more structured sense, dividing Jewish theology into four main areas: an exegetical, a dogmatic, a historical and a practical theology, and suggested supporting the first three areas with, respectively, philology, philosophy and history as models and supplementary sciences. In this context, the elder Philippson repeatedly emphasised the importance of a connection to the general historical sciences. The academic training of 'clergy' at universities to instruct the Jewish population according to the principles of religious and civil emancipation was of particular importance to him. 'The university is the pre-eminent and appropriate educational institution, because it is here that the freedom to study is exercised, the most crucial element of all spiritual education.'6

Thus, the Philippsons wholeheartedly supported the intentions of Abraham Geiger, who also aimed – in the spirit of his teacher Leopold Zunz – to create 'out of Judaism a new and revived Jewishness' (Geiger and Elbogen 1910: 17).

In the course of time, however, Zunz und Geiger offered two very different contributions

6 Phöbus Philippson (pseudonym Dr. Uri), 'Ideen zu einer Encyclopädie und Methodologie der jüdischen Theologie', cited from Engelhardt 2014: 126–7. to the further development of the science of Judaism. 'A further programmatic essay on the function und duty of the science of Judaism', which Zunz published in 1845, some 27 years after his first draft, strongly demonstrated an anti-theological and anti-religious objective', the liberation from religious paternalism (Schäfer and Herrmann 2012: 56). The chairman of German Judaic scholars, Giuseppe Veltri, summed up the difference as follows:

For Zunz it was about having Jewish literature and history represented at university, because, as he put it: 'Great is the uncertainty, the prejusdice, the injustice in everything which affects the social and historical existence of the Jews: science, prosperity, harmony and morality gain nothing if the learned Jew and his achievements are rebuffed so disparagingly, unkindly and rather patricianly.' (Veltri 2014)

The goal for the father of the science of Judaism was to scientifically educate 'civil servants and lawmakers' about Jewish history and literature (L. Geiger 1916: 324). For Abraham Geiger, on the other hand, the goal of the science of Judaism was to underline the expectations of Jewish theology as an academic subject, or, as he writes, 'with the reversal of the idea, with the complete change of perspective, they also changed the expectations of Jewish theology as a science' (A. Geiger 1836: 3).

# The emergence of a new subject within the German university system

The German Council of Science and Humanities described, in 2010, the difficult emergence of Jewish theology as a new academic subject at German universities:

As a matter of fact, [even] some way into the twentieth century, [Christian theologians] maintained their claims to monopoly on the

interpretation of religion and Christianity in universities. As part of the emancipatory process in the nineteenth century, German Jewry struggled to secure university education for their clerical personnel, without any success. (Wissenschaftsrat 2010: 12)<sup>7</sup>

As we have seen, it took until 1963 for the first institute of Jewish studies to be established in Germany at the Freie Universität, Berlin, and until 2013 for the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam to be created as the first German Jewish divinity school.

The notion of the science of Judaism achieving equality with other sciences, and thereby effecting the civic emancipation of Judaism through the inclusion of Jewish studies at the university (Schäfer and Herrmann 2012: 57), had already been formulated from a non-Jewish perspective by Johann Georg Diefenbach (1757-1831): Jüdischer Professor der Theologie auf christlicher Universität. Eine Aufgabe für christliche Staaten' ('Jewish Professor of Theology at a Christian University: A Duty for Christian States'; Diefenbach 1821). But this appeal remained an exception. On 25 July 1848, Zunz submitted a request to the Prussian education minister, Adalbert von Ladenberg (1798-1855), to create a full professorship of Jewish history and literature at the University of Berlin as a point of entry for the science of Judaism into German universities. This request was rejected by the department of philosophy on the following grounds: 'because the unconditional equality [of Jews] has been achieved and guaranteed, and because the Jews no longer form a particular political grouping among us and, as they themselves often assure us, no longer wish to be a people within a people' (L. Geiger 1916: 337).

7 As the official English translation of the document is somewhat unclear here, I offer my own as a direct translation from the German.

This assessment also stated that the 'pillar and representative of the Jewish religion is a priesthood. The training of rabbis or priests is a matter for seminaries, but not really for universities' (L. Geiger 1916: 338). This view meant that for many years no place was granted for the science of Judaism at a German university - neither for Jewish studies or for Jewish theology. In 1912, when the Magdeburg-born social-liberal theologian Martin Rade (1857-1940) campaigned in vain for the establishment of a department of Jewish theology in the soon-to-be-founded University of Frankfurt am Main, deeming it to be 'the worthiest, healthiest and most useful form of recognition of the large financial contribution of Frankfurt Jews to the founding of the university' (Wiese 1999: 335-6), it led to controversy. The renowned Protestant Old Testament scholar Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) answered Rade in a private letter in March 1912:

Are you really familiar with current Jewish science, and do you know if it is already in such a position as to occupy a worthy place in a Prussian university? The process has otherwise always, and justly so, been that new disciplines must first of all justify their existence and that, if a science was found to exist, a place was created for it, not vice versa! What I have personally experienced of Jewish 'science' has never commanded my particular respect. Our Jewish scholars have, in most cases, not even experienced the Renaissance. (Wiese 1999: 339)

This is how, once again, a privileged Protestant theologian denigrates Jewish research, seeing it as a discipline that is prejudice-laden, apologetic, and lacking the dignity requisite for a university.

The general rejection of Jewish theology as a discipline of sufficient standing by the state and the Protestant Church eventually led to its institutionalisation outside universities. In 1854, the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau (Wrocław) was founded as a stronghold of 'positive-historical Judaism' related to the teachings of Rabbi Zacharias Frankel, as was the Berlin Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in 1872 with an allegiance to Abraham Geiger's liberal Judaism. 'According to its statutes, the exclusive purpose was to be the 'preservation, advancement, and dissemination of Wissenschaft des Judentums ("scientific study of Judaism")' (Meyer 1978: 801). Peter Schäfer and Klaus Herrmann regard the academic achievement of both institutions as impressive: 'Lecturers included numerous well-known academics who, in different fields of Jewish studies, wrote works which are still valid today' (Schäfer and Herrmann 2012: 60). In 1873, Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer added his rabbinical seminary to the two existing ones. Despite its orthodox orientation Hildesheimer was dedicated to scholarship and supported the notion of secular studies encouraging his students to enroll at university for a more complete tuition (Eliav and Hildesheimer 2008; see also Ellenson 1990).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the scientific training of rabbis and religion teachers was a focal point of the institutes in Berlin and Breslau (in 1931 Breslau's Jewish Theological Seminary was awarded the title of 'College for Jewish Theology' by the Prussian government) (Mayer Berman *et al.* 1978: 466). A student could, however, also take a purely theoretical final exam without practical objectives (Heller 1931: 160). Tragically, the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau was closed in November 1938 following Kristallnacht; the Berlin institute, which had been downgraded in status to a 'Lehranstalt' (academy) by the Nazis, remained in existence until the summer of 1942.

#### Institutional heirs

The non-denominational College for Jewish Studies in Heidelberg (opened 1979), the Reform Abraham Geiger College at the University of Potsdam (founded 1999) with its School of Jewish Theology (founded in 2013 together with the Conservative Zacharias Frankel College as its adjunct institute) and the Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin, aiming to carry on Hildesheimer's work since 2009, today follow in the footsteps of nineteenth-century predecessors. Nowadays they are jointly financed by the Jewish community as well as the state. Looking back into the history of the emergence of Jewish studies in Germany one may rightly claim that the science of Judaism in Germany has always had secular as well as religious strands right up to the present day. Theological as well as philological, cultural and historical branches all belong to its spectrum of studies.8

On the fifteenth anniversary in 2014 of the founding of the Abraham Geiger College at the University of Potsdam – also a year after the opening of its School of Jewish Theology – Giuseppe Veltri concluded his speech thus: 'this difference renders, as a logical consequence, Jewish studies and Jewish theology "different siblings", united by a mother, the science of Judaism' (Veltri 2014).

#### Jewish theology today

Today, the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam consists of seven denominational professorial chairs, whose teaching and research are entirely dedicated to the rich and multi-faceted history of Judaism over more than three millennia, from ancient times to the pres-

8 The same applies to the Institute for Judaic Studies, opened in Warsaw in 1928. It was 'the first Jewish school in Europe with a scientific curriculum including not only theological subjects but also secular Judaic studies'; Jewish Warsaw 2018.

ent. The Jewish theology curriculum encompasses the following core subjects: history and philosophy of the Jewish religion; the Hebrew Bible and its exegesis; the Talmud and rabbinical literature; halakha; Jewish liturgy and religious practice; the history of Jewish music; Hebrew and Aramaic philology. The scope of material covered by the degree programme is extensive: from the Hebrew Bible and the great theological works of the Middle Ages to the thinkers and intellectual debates of modern times.

The BA/MA degree programme there is open to all interested applicants regardless of their religious affiliation. Right now, about 25 of our 150 students are studying for the rabbinate or cantorate. Their practical vocational training takes place at the Abraham Geiger College for Liberal candidates and at the Zacharias Frankel College for Conservative/Masorti candidates. The other students at the school are considering careers in academia, in the media, governance and human resources management or in the cultural sector, to name but a few job prospects. Their learning prepares each of them to deal intelligently and sensitively with a multi-cultural society. It gives them the cultural-literacy background that is needed today when working collaboratively with people from different religious, ethnic, racial and national backgrounds. Those attending the Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin in the Hildesheimer tradition do not usually pursue studies at an academic level.

So one can clearly say: the science of Judaism has offered a way to strengthen the identity and self-appreciation of a great many Jews since its emergence two centuries ago. The nineteenth century was occupied with carving out a place within the university system for Judaism and the Jewish tradition. And it had a clear purpose: to strive for equality in a Christian society challenged by Judaism's demand for recognition.

# Pluralisation, not secularisation: the role of theologies in modern Germany

Recent decades have seen an international shift in universities from denominationally biased divinity schools towards more diverse theology or religious-studies departments. This trend is not followed in Germany.

I have mentioned already the 2010 Recommendations on the Advancement of Theologies and Sciences concerned with Religions at German Universities. In this policy paper the Wissenschaftsrat came to the conclusion that the tertiary university system was the preferred setting for the pursuit of denominational Christian and non-Christian theologies. They recommended that, whatever the religion or denomination, priority should be given to anchoring theology in the state's tertiary institutions rather than encouraging religious groups and churches to found private academies and seminaries. The council also recommended that the proper place to develop and study theology was in the context of other academic disciplines in state universities, and it argued emphatically for Christian theology to be restructured accordingly and for the establishment of the discipline of non-Christian theology in German tertiary institutions.

Even in Western societies, religious orientations and loyalties remain an essential source of collective values and rules for individual lifestyle. Therefore, modern, constitutional democracies have a vital interest in utilising the religious orientations of their citizens for the stability and development of the community. Moral sensitivities, for which religions have developed differentiated forms of expression with deep cultural roots, meet with acceptance even in places where the society sees itself as secular and are included in the general process of social communication. For instance, religious communities contribute their views in debates about issues of how to treat nature or how to deal with human boundary experiences.

Secluding the theologies in independent, ecclesiastical institutions can encourage the isolation of the respective religious community from society. This is why state and society also have an interest in integrating the theologies in the state-run university system. The integration of the theologies ensures that the believers articulate their actual lived creeds in the knowledge that they can also be regarded, from outside, as historically contingent. It confronts the religious community with the challenge of continually reinterpreting their beliefs under evolving conditions and horizons of knowledge. This can be achieved best under the regulated conditions of scientific and scholarly communication and production of knowledge at the universities. In the same way, state and society will forestall the tendencies of religious attitudes to become one-sided and fundamentalist. (Wissenschaftsrat 2010: 54)

Peter L. Berger (2015) and José Casanova (2015) were among those who emphasised that we may often confuse secularisation and pluralisation. Therefore, the Council aims to create a common platform where secular and religious discourses can meet and enter into debate at the crossroads of society. As a result of the recommendations of the Council, a number of centres for Islamic theology were also founded in Germany: Nürnberg-Erlangen, Frankfurt-Giessen, Münster, Osnabrück and Tübingen.<sup>9</sup> Berlin will follow with another institute for Islamic theology in 2019. The creation of the Potsdam School of Jewish Theology in 2013 has to be seen in this light. It completed the political intentions of a pluralisation of theology as a university subject.

These developments cemented the place of theologies in German universities and also

9 See an overview published by the Goethe Institute 2018.

established a pluralisation of theology as a subject that is defined by denominational adherence (Wissenschaftsrat 2010: 54). Within a couple of years, non-Christian theologies in Germany could be raised to the same level of recognition and heal a great post-colonial wound.

## Reflections on the development in Norway

The current situation in Norway does not seem so different. Looking at the assessment of Ruth Illman and Björn Dahla, Jewish concerns have for centuries formed a part of the academic work within faculties of Christian theology and the humanities in the Nordic countries (Illman and Dahla 2016). When one looks at the University of Oslo and its Faculty of Theology, Protestant theology now clearly opens up against the backdrop of a large Muslim population in Norway and has already inaugurated a professorship of theological studies of Islam, Safet Bektovic. With Catherine Hezser on the faculty the Jewish aspect has also been successfully integrated. When one looks at Oddbjørn Leirvik's work and the many endeavours of his colleagues here one can see that a vision of interreligious theology is well under way. I applaud this as a colleague holding the only Jewish chair in interreligious dialogue in Germany.

The aim of this article has been to show that it makes good sense to identify the Jewish tradition as an integral part of a monotheistic triangle within interreligious theological deliberations. When challenged with the question of where to situate Judaism and the academic study of Jewish tradition it seems to me to be best placed in the theological context. At the same time, Jewish theology, in its heterogeneity, should preferably also reflect the plurality of positions and contexts that make up Judaism both today and throughout history. An integral part of this context are the two religions deriving from the Jewish tradition: Christianity and Islam. They form a monotheistic triangle where

common academic interest is shared – enriching and challenging each other, learning from one another.

The goal remains to ensure the continuities of our traditions – Jewish, Christian and Muslim – within a willingness to debate and cooperate with other religions, which must meet as equals in a pluralistic society. Judaism differs from Christianity more than many believe and it has closer ties to Islam than most might assume. As part of a religious triangle it forms a family of questions, which are shared even if the answers differ.

Both in Germany and in Norway, we must address the ongoing relevance of the Jewish tradition in a very similar context that includes stereotypes and antisemitism in a society moulded by the church, where a small Jewish community exists alongside a rising Muslim population. It is therefore clear that religious discourse in a pluralistic context is an important element of life in today's society and will remain so. While searching for common ground, we must offer an introduction to Judaism for Muslims.

The German model envisages a pluralist society where different faith groups form an integral part of the national life, and mutually contribute on many levels to the common life and well-being of society, on the social, political, cultural and intellectual levels. The challenge of the next few years will be whether we can bring these theologies into a fruitful mode of interaction and communication, capable too of dialogue with a growing segment of society that is not part of a religious discourse or faith-group.

The Jewish Museum in Oslo uncovers the story of Norway's Jews – their contribution to the country's arts and culture (see the Jødisk Museum website). Jewish theology goes some steps further. To quote Rabbi Louis Jacobs: 'Jewish theology is an attempt to think through consistently the implications of the Jewish religion' (Jacobs 1973: 1). These are implications

not only for Norway's tiny Jewish community while negotiating its identity, but for the society at large. Group identities are always enlivened, reinterpreted and contested, and the complexities of belonging to a minority in a multicultural society are of concern to all of us. The orientation of Jewish studies and Jewish theology in Norway in the future, I suggest, should be to secure and to demonstrate Jewish continuity as a living religion. This affords both the courage to disagree as well as the will to cooperate with other religions.



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